

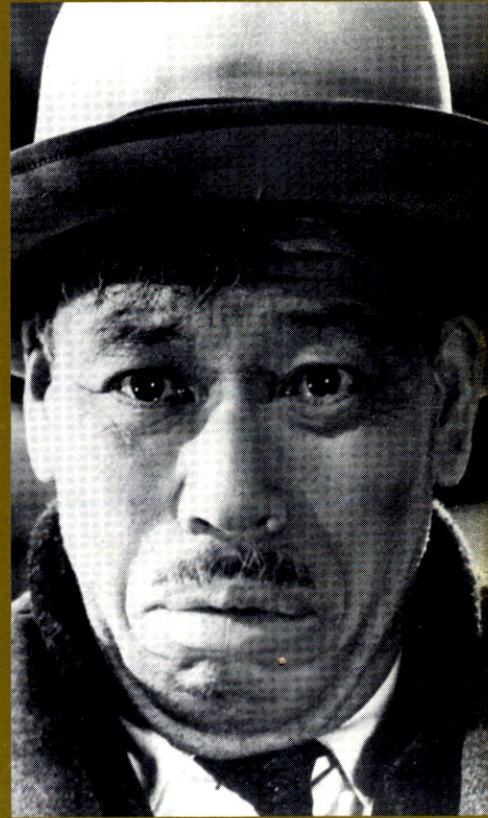
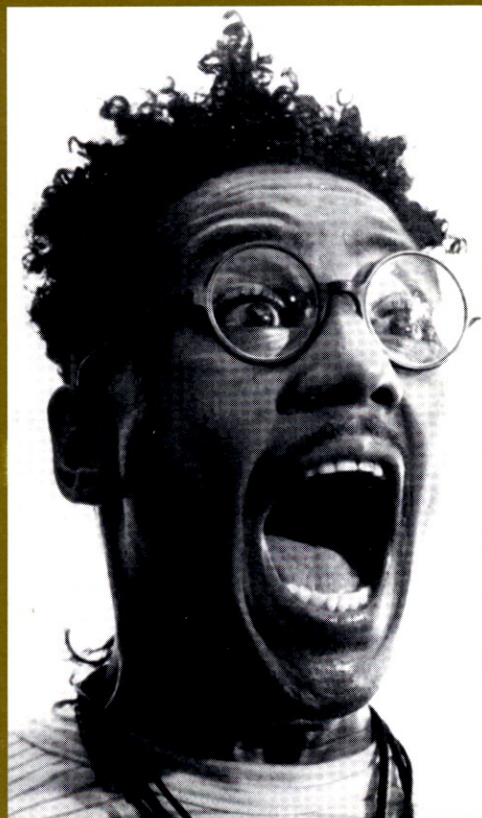
Radical Film Criticism and Theory

# *cine*ACTION

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RE-READINGS: FIVE MOVIE CLASSICS. BERGMAN—GWTW—HITCHCOCK—KUROSAWA—OPHLÜS



DOING THE RIGHT THING: A SPIKE LEE DOSSIER



# cineACTION

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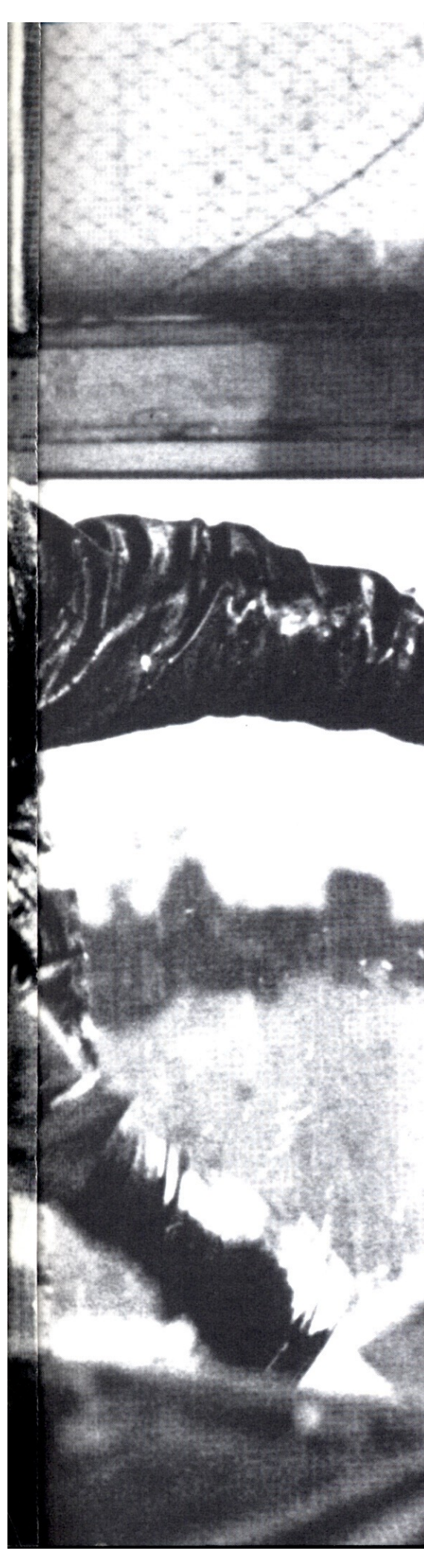
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Brad Pitt in David Fincher's *Seven*, one of  
the films to be discussed in the next issue.







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# Editorial

The question of our cultural past—how we relate to it, what uses we can legitimately make of it—has been for me a steady (and steadily growing) preoccupation. I speak as a white Eurocentric male who is committed to the ideal of multiculturalism but also continues to value his own inheritance in a culture in which people of different races, colours, religions, backgrounds, can learn to coexist not just peacefully but to their mutual enrichment. For whites of my generation the ‘cultural past’ was a very different matter, and for many of us it retains its potency and its relevance. Born and raised within a British middle-class environment in the ‘30s, I would certainly never have escaped its suffocating confines but for my discovery of books, music, films: particularly British books, European music, Hollywood films. These opened up imaginative and emotional worlds quite foreign to my immediate circumstances, and they were overwhelmingly the productions of white Eurocentric males (plus a few female novelists). Today there seems to be a widespread assumption that the works of ‘dead white males’ are automatically discredited: after all, Shakespeare, Mozart, Tolstoy, John Ford knew nothing of post-’60s feminism, the Third World, African-American culture, or ‘political correctness’, so what can they possibly have to say to us?

It is surely of vital importance that any culture, if it to thrive, should at once honour, preserve, and continuously interrogate its traditions, neither rejecting nor blindly following them. As the culture changes, so do the meanings of its past products: we find new significances, new ways of using them, as well as aspects that we must discard or distance ourselves from.

The living art of the past points always toward the future; the struggle of ‘Life Against Death’ so brilliantly defined by Norman O. Brown in a book more terrifyingly apposite today than when it was written, is dramatized, on many different levels of consciousness, in work after work, from the operas of Mozart to the films of Hitchcock, from Bergman to Kurosawa. Questions of our past’s contemporary relevance are central to this issue of *CineAction*.

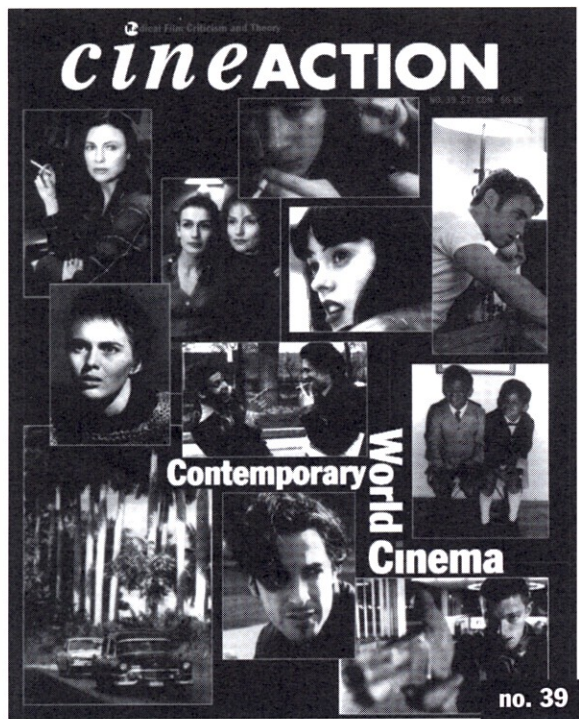
The nature of my commitment to the past implies, logically and inevitably, a commitment to the future. Hence *CineAction*’s concern to provide a forum for new voices, the voices of younger generations. More than half the articles in this issue were written by students and originated as class essays. For me, this implies no lowering of standards. It is time that academics—all too often, in my opinion, insulated in a totally unwarranted sense of self-importance—recognized that their students often have more interesting things to say than they do themselves.

Spike Lee is, with Scorsese, one of the only two important filmmakers who have been able to develop and sustain a career within the overwhelmingly inimical conditions of corporation-dominated modern Hollywood, and *Do the Right Thing* seems generally regarded as his masterpiece to date: a view with which one may concur while still deploring the almost uniform critical undervaluing of his recent films. Its complexity, arising from Lee’s attempt to orchestrate a number of divergent positions, has led to a wide range of interpretation and evaluation. Four divergent readings of the film are presented here, without editorial interference, in the interests of furthering critical debate.

Robin Wood



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# **HAS GONE WITH THE WIND GONE WITH THE WIND? OR,**



**CAN WE BE INTELLIGENT ABOUT THE PAST?**

**by Tony French**



I first saw *Gone with the Wind* at the Regal Cinema, Chesterfield, Derbyshire, England, in August 1944. I was aged thirteen, the film five; the Western Allies were closing the Falaise Gap, the Poles trying to free Warsaw, and my father, stuck down in devastated London, dodging buzz-bombs. So I saw the film's version of the American Civil War through the Second World War, with ice cream substitute served during

of Melanie Wilkes? Notions of what a Good Woman may be are different now from what they were in 1939 (let alone 1861), to a point where no decent woman today would be caught even listening to Schumann's *Frauenliebe und Leben*; but even so Melly's self-denial is so thoroughgoing, her charity so coercive and as it were predatory (it even draws some fulsome words from the sardonic Rhett Butler), that today's audience may well



the interval, which came just after Scarlett O'Hara swore she'd never be hungry again. And now seeing my response of 1944, so far as I can recall it, through my response of 1994, I really wonder how I — we — can 'read' the film, even *whether* we can read it at all. Can one even sit through its obvious racism and sexism and all the other deplorable values it embodies and mediates? For example — to leave aside for the moment its treatment of 'coloured folk' — what of its presentation

recoil in nausea at her self-crucifixion, which psychologically no doubt arises from a self-hatred so intense as to suggest an emotional sickness, a neurosis so deepseated as to merit pity rather than disgust.

But of course some such problems arise about women in a great many 'old' films and, for that matter, in nineteenth-century novels: the difficulties raised for readers by (to mention only a few) the Joan Fontaine characters in *Rebecca* and *Letter from an Unknown*





Scarlett (Vivien Leigh) and Mammy (Hattie McDaniel) worry about her waistline.

*Woman*, or, again, by Amelia Sedley in *Vanity Fair*, or Amy in *Little Dorrit*, are such that one is tempted just to give up with a shrug. So much are our values at odds with those of a century ago that one may now reasonably wonder whether Dorothea Brooke isn't, in her stubborn idealistic blindness, one of the most sinister characters not merely in *Middlemarch* but in Victorian fiction, though there is no sign that George Eliot meant, consciously at least, any such thing. Indeed the moral systems (if I may use that phrase) of many past works of art, filmic or literary, tend, when seen from the present, to look absolutely grotesque — offensive when they aren't merely quaint.

What then can we do? One way out of our problem is to admit freely that works from the past are a mine — or rubbish-tip — of discarded values: to study them for what they tell us about the ways in which people used to think and feel and the rules by which they tried (or thought they tried) to live (or thought they lived). Another way is to suggest that a work's overt and ostensible value-system is in fact being presented ironically — that the values are not being endorsed but, in varying degrees and by varying methods, subverted, ironised: that they are so full of internal



contradictions that they batter themselves to pieces. And the third way of coping with the problem (different only in degree from the second) is to go back into past works and, like Inquisitors plucking truths from their writhing beneficiaries, simply *impose* our values upon them, ignoring the 'fact' that 'in those days' people 'just didn't believe' what we believe today — whoever 'we' may happen to be. All of these suggested methods are familiar enough in literary criticism, whether today's or yesterday's, and no doubt in film criticism too. Whether the methods are completely incompatible with one another, and whether they exhaust all the possibilities, is of course another, and daunting, question.

My case about *Gone with the Wind* will be that, while it offers points of lodgment to each of these approaches, it is finally, even at its best (about the first three-fifths — up to Scarlett's marriage to Rhett), too incoherent to be consistently readable in any one way. The film's producer, David O. Selznick, its three directors and many writers either never settled down to a coherent point of view or else (what comes to the same thing) were trying to satisfy too many people and offend no one at all. Film is admittedly a collaborative art, but collaboration on the hapless set of this film must at times have degenerated into a kind of bewildering promiscuity. Yet perhaps, in view of the fact that matters of colour, gender and social/political organization are still, in the 1990s, battlefields as bloodstained as Gettysburg, we should be surprised not that the film's creators did so poorly but that, all subtractions made, they did so well.

After the idealized pastoral images of the South which accompany the credit titles, we read the following rubric:

**There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South...**

**Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave...**

**Look for it only in books for it is no more than a dream remembered.**

**A Civilization gone with the wind...**

This is a remarkably ambiguous performance, for all its lulling elegiac tone. For example, are we supposed to remember that the wealth of the 'Cavaliers' came from the cotton-fields, which were worked by the 'Slaves' (a simple matter of historical record, after all)? Was the world 'pretty' for the slaves, or only for the 'Masters'? Don't the 'Knights and their Ladies Fair' come straight out of Tom Sawyer's dangerous chivalric romancing, utterly inappropriate (as Huck Finn saw) to the realities of nineteenth-century America — blending, as they do, a fake medievalism with memories of Charles I's nobles in a way that would have seemed bizarre in the *England*

of 1939? A Sancho Panza in the first-night audience might well have concluded that Don Quixote was off after another of his fantasies, or even that he was just off his head; but perhaps the rubric is meant merely to show the audience that they are to suspend not only disbelief but common sense too, and enter a fairytale world which was, so the penultimate sentence half-suggests, *never* more than a 'dream.' Indeed, the opening pastoral images, which look as if they had strayed into the film off the lid of a chocolate-box or from one of Norman Rockwell's covers for *The Saturday Evening Post*, together with Max Steiner's atrocious score — Rachmaninov and molasses — all invite us to a nostalgic wallow.

(Parenthetically: for anyone interested in classical music, the extra-diegetic music of 'thirties and 'forties films can be a real headache — so much of it is a talentless mimicry of late-Romantic idiom, and so much of it underlines emotions which are already tolerably evident from the acting. It would be interesting to know who started the practice of using music which does *not* emphasize what is obvious but on the contrary cuts *against* the characters' feelings, as in Bergman's *Såsom i en Spegel*, or else, as in Janos Szasz's use of Purcell and Pergolesi in his shattering recent *Woyzeck*, offers us a view of those feelings utterly unavailable to the characters themselves.)

Despite the pastoral images and the sound-track, however, the early sequences of *Gone with the Wind* are not dreamlike or idealized at all — actually they seem in their exaggeration to demand reading as self-parody, although it is hard to be sure because there are representatives of so many different generations of actors (one pair, Harry Davenport [Dr. Meade] and Olivia de Havilland, having been born fifty years apart) who pursue their craft in very different ways, despite whatever interventions were made by whichever director presided over a given sequence. Scarlett O'Hara coquettes fatuously with Tweedledum and Tweedledee (alias the Tarleton twins, sporting absurd Harpo Marx wigs) till she hears that Ashley Wilkes is to marry his cousin Melanie, whereupon she pouts and sulks rather like Joan Crawford in *The Women*; Mammy enacts one burlesque, and the field-hands another, of slave humours; and Thomas Mitchell, as Gerald O'Hara, does an outrageous impersonation of a stage Irishman, hard-riding and hard-drinking and with a brogue so thick you could cut it, Bedad. After a sobering encounter between Mrs. O'Hara (plainly the real head of the household) and the Yankee overseer whose bastard child by the white-trash Slattery girl has just been stillborn, evening prayers take place — a brief glance at the O'Haras' Catholicism which henceforward simply disappears, together with the problems — about the daughter's marriageability, for instance — which it would certainly have caused in the 1860s.

Moving on to the barbecue at Twelve Oaks, we



meet Ashley and Melanie in person; and we come face to face with the problem of how seriously to take the characters and the values they presumably embody. Whether I try to see Ashley through Scarlett's eyes, as an attractive beau, or through Melanie's, as well read and thoughtful, or through his later career as one of the 'Cavaliers' of the opening rubric, he still comes out as almost a nullity; and since one of the most important narrative and emotional strands of the whole film from start to finish hangs on our being able to feel with Scarlett that Ashley has at any rate some substance as a male (and to feel with the film that he has some representative substance), we may well be as baffled as I earlier said we were by the cousin he marries. Perhaps, though, Ashley acquires some reality in the council-of-war scene. As Scarlett steals downstairs from her siesta, we hear her father's voice, from John Wilkes's study, declaiming about the South's right to keep slaves and therefore secede from the Union if it so chooses; his tone suggests he is looking forward to a scrap, and the other male guests bluster about gentlemen being better at fighting than mere Yankees. Ashley, however, is lukewarm (his normal temperature) when Mr. O'Hara appeals to him — most of the world's miseries, he says, have been caused by wars, and when they were over no one could remember what they had been about. But before we have time to digest this amazing generalization and to reflect that on the film's own showing the imminent war is not about nothing and will not soon be forgotten, Rhett Butler (who has been casting skeptical looks at hotheads) is invited to give his views, and contemptuously points out that a war can't be won with words. The North has cannon factories, mines and a fleet; the South, cotton, slaves and arrogance — and that's not enough. Pointedly not challenging Charles Hamilton (Melanie's brother) who insults him, he exposes sensibly and unanswerably the South's juvenile bravado.

I don't know how this film would, in 1939, have been received by a factory-worker in Detroit (especially if he were black), an Irish immigrant in Boston, or a Mormon Elder in Salt Lake City — so many audiences to cater for! But one imagines that the first Southern audience would never have seen how ludicrously unreal the Cavaliers' attitude was being made to seem: so it seems likely at this point that we have a classic case of a film whose intrinsic ideology only emerges long after it was made. Only Rhett Butler, the outsider with the undressing glance up the stairs at an immediately responsive Scarlett — Rhett of the black hair, black coat and black reputation, — only he lives *dans le réel*, in the real world; the rest are indeed lost in a dream from which only Ashley will briefly and uneasily awaken.

This is true not only in political but also in erotic terms. Rhett is behind the sofa in the handsome library (Twelve Oaks, unlike Tara, has one) when Scarlett

makes her declaration to Ashley and forces him to admit that he 'cares' for her — not enough, though, for him to throw over Melanie. She dresses him down and slaps his face; he leaves *sans reproche*, as he had earlier left the gathering of ardent chevaliers; his habit of running away may be construed as cowardice or courage, according to taste. As Scarlett furiously throws a vase at the wall, Rhett arises from concealment (the iconography here giving a sly sideglance towards Venus Anadyomene), exclaiming 'Phew! Has the war started?' — a question which neatly punctures the ridiculous heroics of passion and renunciation practised by Scarlett and Ashley, just as Rhett had exploded the political heroics of the Quixotes in Mr. Wilkes's study. It is only fitting that Scarlett, piqued by Ashley's commitment to the 'mealy-mouthed' Melanie (a description less tainted by its source than the script *perhaps* intended), and enraged by Rhett's amused contempt, should at once, as Charles Hamilton rushes off to the real war which has just broken out, agree to his proposal of marriage — the half-suggestion being (for those who like to take it) that the War, the Cause, is as ill-considered as the nuptials and that the Cavaliers are as petulant as Scarlett O'Hara. That Charles should at once succumb to complications of measles introduces a note of something approaching farce into the proceedings. But one must assume, I suppose, that the first Southern audiences would either have not seen the 'farce' at all or else have seen it very much as, in my youth, elderly critics used to see Falstaff or Enobarbus — as 'comic relief' without relevance to the *real* concerns of the works they appeared in. They conceded the humour but deflected its point. Similarly, Melanie's self-denial, so unacceptable to us, was presumably seen as epitomizing Southern Christian Womanhood (and doubtless still would, in some quarters) — her very lostness in the harsh war- and post-war world, the real world, guaranteed the authenticity of the values she enshrined, as Ashley's did too. Few cultures are unitary, therefore any work of art, especially of popular art, needs to offer very various identification-points for its extremely miscellaneous audience. The results will not be unified; works of popular art seldom are (I sometimes wonder if any are).

The note of what I have called 'farce' continues through some at least of the long series of sequences set in Atlanta (where Scarlett goes after her husband's death), which take us from the South's early victories through to Sherman's siege of the city as a prelude to his march through Georgia to the sea, and which are dramatically and cinematically the most satisfying parts, to me, of a very uneven film (partly perhaps because my own first experience of it was in the midst of war, separation and devastation).

The ball scene, where Scarlett in widows' weeds 'sells' herself, in what one of the censorious matrons says



is like a slave-auction, to Rhett Butler for his \$150 in gold, scandalizing all save Melanie who is as blind as ever to truths that stare her in the face, while Dr. Meade announces 'another glorious victory,' shows — to us who know our history — that the Cause can't, as Rhett indeed prophesied, finance itself and that its proponents, 'regardless of their doom,' are dancing over an abyss. Through all of these scenes, Rhett's contemptuous presence serves to remind us not merely of the hopelessness of the Cause but also that, to him (as he frankly tells Scarlett) and doubtless to others, it is mostly an opportunity to make money; at least until his (to me entirely unconvincing) change of heart on the road to Tara, he never has the slightest illusion about the civilization that is coming to an end. Ashley too, in his limp and ineffectual way (it is impossible to imagine him as a soldier) testifies, when he comes home on Christmas furlough and helps to eat the last chicken in Atlanta and drink the last of Aunt Pittypat's father's uncle's madeira, to the cruel accuracy of Rhett's diagnosis, though of course Ashley could hardly be expected to see that the war has its humorous as well as its profitable side. And Rhett's presence also casts a scorching light on the pious legends that from time to time adorn the screen ('Atlanta prayed'), just as his mistress, Belle Watling — a courtesan with a heart not of Confederate paper money but of real gold — casts an odd light on the respectability of the 'nice' ladies, though conversely she is used, more than once, to ridicule Melanie's proclivity to see sermons in stones and good in everyone.

The birth of Melanie's baby, conceived on Ashley's leave, coincides with Sherman's siege and bombardment of Atlanta. Dr. Meade feels he has better things to do than obstetrics and anyway Prissy, the slave Scarlett has brought with her from Tara as her maid, claims that she knows all that's necessary about bringing babies.

In a film so much of which is inaccessible nowadays unless we see it as comic, Prissy presents some awkward problems. On the face of it, she is silly, vain, conceited, boastful, feckless, incompetent and craven; and I suppose these qualities would have been seen by the original audience in the South as typifying at least some slaves — the least estimable, of course — or so one hopes, repelling the thought that many whites would very likely have thought 'all the ones who aren't like Mammy are like Prissy.' Taking the film as it comes, then, one would have to judge that these episodes with Prissy are to be consigned to history as being nowadays repulsive. Yet one may reflect, without straying from what the film itself shows, that many of the white southerners are so given to empty boasting, delusions of competence, and instant self-mythologising (the men in Mr. Wilkes's study, for example), that Prissy seems no worse than they are and, being less educated, has a great deal more excuse. And if her folly

nearly leads to the death of Melanie in childbirth, to what, we may ask, has the folly of her white masters led? It has led to what we see in the episode that bisects Melanie's long-drawn-out labour, where Scarlett goes down to the railway depot and we behold, in that amazing crane-shot, the flower of the South lying in dying rows — a scene which earlier sequences in the hospital have skillfully led up to. Similarly, when Scarlett loses her temper with Prissy, first threatening to 'strap' her then to 'sell' her 'down south,' and finally slapping her downstairs, we see for the first time the true and ugly face of slavery — what it *really* meant for one human being to own another and the actual nature of the Cause for which the South, Old Glory a-flutter over the railroad's dying-fields, is fighting.

In the episode where Prissy goes down to Belle Watling's establishment to beg Rhett's help, she first boasts that it was mostly she who brought the baby with a bit of help from Scarlett, and then collapses into hysterics as the gunfire gets closer. And when she packs up the crockery, back at Aunt Pittypat's house, she throws it into a trunk and smashes it. Seeing these scenes again after many years, one is struck (as the first audiences may not have been) by the parallels between Prissy's behaviour and that of the white folks: less than two minutes' running-time after her breaking the plates, a white mob of looters is smashing in a shop window, while much earlier, at the start of the siege, we have seen white Atlantans fleeing in panic on carts piled high with useless goods and possessions, including of all things a harp. I don't claim that Selznick and his team, back in 1939, consciously intended these parallels; but they are demonstrably there, and I think we should be as cautious of reading a film over-historically as we should be of reading it unhistorically or ahistorically. Indeed, 'intention' (if we use the word at all) can prove to be something that only slowly reveals itself — think of the way in which the intention, the true sense (if it has one) of Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony, lay buried for thirty years. Many films and other artworks have a curiously contingent existence, hovering between what we think now and what we think we know people thought in the past.

When Scarlett's wretched cart drawn by its terminal horse, with its cargo of a sick woman, her baby, and a terrified slave, finally reach Tara, they find the house intact (the Yankees have been using it as a headquarters) but Mrs. O'Hara dead of typhoid, the never very effectual Gerald O'Hara childish-crazy, all but two of the slaves fled, and nothing to eat. Scarlett, throwing up after gobbling down a raw radish in the fields, swears, silhouetted against an angry red sky, that as God is her witness she'll never be hungry again. The silhouette repeats one from near the beginning of the film when Gerald was explaining to her the prime importance of *land* — the 'only thing in the world





Rhett (Clark Gable) sceptical about Scarlett's performance.

worth working for — worth fighting for — worth dying for... the only thing that lasts': the red earth of Tara. But now, of course, as the South is going down to ruin, land — the basis of an agrarian economy — can never look quite the same again, and moreover there are no slaves to work it, a fact which somewhat diminishes its ineffable glamour. What is Scarlett — now having taken her dead mother's place as head of the household and plantation — to do?

She starts by picking such cotton as is left, with the help of her sisters; Mammy and Pork are no good at it because they're too old and house-servants anyway, but her sisters and she are not much good, either. The utter precariousness of Tara's and the whole culture's position becomes clear from various incidents that at once follow. A marauding Yankee (probably a deserter — but who knows in these times?) walks into the house for whatever he can get, giving Scarlett another undressing look up the stairs, and she, using the pistol Rhett gave her as he went off to fight with the defeated army, blows his face off, disposing of the corpse with the help of the shrinking Melanie, who is too weak even to lift her late brother Charles's old sword. They find some welcome money on the



body, but the incident further undermines any confidence Scarlett might have reacquired in the tenability of life on her ancestral land.

The war has now ended, the carpetbaggers (a potent visual image for the first Southern audience) are swarming in, scalawags abound, and Mammy delouses the returning soldiers including not only Frank Kennedy (who at the Wilkes's barbecue Scarlett called 'an old maid in breeches') but eventually even Ashley. They return to civilian life, such as it now is.

Taxes, for Tara and Scarlett, are what civilian life is now about — Tara is up for \$300, an impossible amount. Scarlett seeks Ashley's advice and they have an embarrassingly novelettish love-scene (Leslie Howard playing Leslie Howard with well-founded boredom), enacted on what looks like a hastily run-up studio set of stupefying amateurishness. He tells her that the real reason she has for going on living is not him but the 'red earth of Tara' — exactly what her father told her, and precisely the thing that has now become an intolerable liability. Perhaps it was not just an empty belly that made her insides reject that radish, produce of that same red earth.

What then can she do? Why, become a capitalist, of course. Go over from a quasi-aristocratic, agrarian life to one based on trade, commerce and a different form of slavery. Our sense of the new conditions she has to cope with has been strengthened by our glimpse of the carpet-bagger and, straight after the love-scene, by the visit paid to Tara by a scalawag — none other than Jonas Wilkerson, the Yankee overseer dismissed near the start of the film for seducing the girl whom he has in fact since married and whose typhoid killed Mrs. O'Hara. Wilkerson means to be friendly, he says, and make them a good offer for an estate they can't afford to keep up; but Scarlett throws a handful of the red earth in his face and her father rides him off the property, breaking his own neck in the process. Scarlett now plans to get money from Rhett, who is in the Yankee military jail in Atlanta under suspicion of having a lot of Confederate gold hidden somewhere. At the precise midpoint of the film she decides to make herself a new and fashionable dress, and tears down some old green curtains (green is her colour — that of the dollar) to make the rags of the old world into a weapon to conquer the new. Her attempt to extract money from Rhett — during which she mendaciously boasts of Tara's prosperity as shamelessly as any Prissy — is predictably unsuccessful, and as she leaves the jail in dudgeon she has a brush with Belle Watling — the successful scarlet woman scorning the crestfallen green lady who in effect is aspiring to enter her profession. Walking through an Atlanta undergoing literal Reconstruction (new buildings) and political Reconstruction too (gullible blacks on the sidewalk being promised forty acres and a mule in return for

their votes), she runs into Frank Kennedy, now the prosperous owner of a hardware, furniture and lumber store. Scarlett's eyes at once take in the possibilities both of Frank and of his lumber, and she inveigles him into dropping her sister Suellen (to whom he has been long betrothed), marrying her and paying the taxes on Tara — which now, as a locale for the action, virtually disappears from the film, corresponding to a shift in interest, and in the characters' homes and occupations, from country to city, from agriculture to commerce and, eventually, from the landed-gentry class to the nouveau-riche class.

Overriding Ashley's suggestions that the lumber mill she makes Frank buy could be worked by freed slaves, Scarlett insists on employing white convicts under a brute of an Irish overseer, Johnny Gallegher, to beat and starve them into meeting her remorseless demands. She *says* she needs money and yet more money because she never wants the Yankees to be in a position to 'take Tara away' from her; but it soon becomes clear enough, if it isn't already, that Tara has become a mere excuse for acquisitiveness and for the ruthlessness with which she controls her world, even — or especially — its male inhabitants. It never occurs to her that she can only 'beat the Yankees at their own game' by playing precisely that cut-throat commercialism, while at the same time keeping the slavery — or maybe an even harsher version of it — that was the mainstay of the Old South. She has now graduated from being auctioned-off, or selling herself in loveless marriage, to buying men who she knows will in all likelihood be worked to death (the novel is even severer on her in this connection).

To what extent the film itself is, in the person of Scarlett, offering us a kind of encapsulated history of what actually did happen to the South in the decade after Appomattox, I don't know. Certainly she has by now become a short-tempered cash-register whose one human trait is her silly crush on Ashley; but her winsomeness was never more than an act and moreover an act which so easily took in most of the surrounding males as to reduce them to the emotional idiocy which her financial dominance now simply intensifies (her husband is terrified of her).

In fact, I think that by this stage the film is getting hopelessly confused about Scarlett and all she represents. From being (though in a qualified way) approvingly presented as a self-assertive female who has been puncturing men's egos like a child with a pin at a balloon party and who has thereby been exploding many of the South's pretensions, her now rampant capitalism starts being used to put her down, even retroactively, for her usurpation of male roles (films of the 'thirties and 'forties are of course often ambivalent about strong women, the kind of women played by Bette Davis or Barbara Stanwyck). Scarlett is, I think, put down hard



by the episode where she is attacked riding to the mill through shanty-town — a collection of huts inhabited by 'riff-raff,' some white, some black. Disregarding Rhett's warning about driving through it alone, and flourishing her pistol, she goes off in her buggy and is waylaid by two men who, like the Yankee marauder at Tara, are out for what they can get. This time, however, she hasn't the time to get in a shot and would (the implication seems clear) have been not only robbed but raped too had it not been for the intervention of Big Sam, one of her father's ex-slaves (we last saw him marching off to dig trenches for the defence of Atlanta and of the system that fettered him). The upshot is that the same night, unknown to her, her husband and Ashley, members of the original Ku Klux Klan, ride off to 'clean out' shanty-town. Ashley is wounded and Frank killed. Here the film seems to be expecting us to feel that Scarlett's action was wantonly and foolishly provocative, and has resulted in pointless bloodshed in her own family (though we aren't much encouraged to think about what 'cleaning out' might mean for the cleaned). Even the long suffering Melanie is tightlipped with Scarlett, the more so when Rhett Butler only manages to convince the Yankee captain that Ashley had nothing to do with the raid by claiming they were (together with another pillar of society, Dr. Meade) getting drunk in Belle Watling's high-class bordello.

I think the film collapses after this point. Scarlett, now free, marries Rhett; the psychology of the characters, such as it ever was, disintegrates; even the narrative becomes episodic and discontinuous, not to say jerky; and our sense of History, of the South and its painful and in some ways deplorable self-reconstruction, crumbles into total abeyance. One reason for this falling-off is no doubt that the same fate overtakes the novel because, I suspect, Margaret Mitchell no more knew what to do with her peccant heroine than Thackeray knew what to do with Becky Sharp; and she could only end Scarlett's story in the convention of the True Romance heroine who meets a Sad Fate. Another reason may be that Scarlett has finally mated herself, though reluctantly, with one man who can match and mate with her. But by this stage we too perhaps don't, frankly, give a damn.

But anyway, just how 'real' is Rhett? A drawl, a perpetual grin enclosing a Corona, a slouch hat, perfectly-cut clothes draping an athletic frame, and the maddening tic of addressing Scarlett as 'my dear,' hardly add up to anything very substantial; and in fact Clark Gable is really just being himself and letting his male presence and reputation do the rest ('Oh, Mr. Gable!' as Judy Garland sang). The film does show a brief gleam of interest in his relationship with his too-much-loved daughter Bonnie; but no issue of that kind could be allowed to pollute the cloud of bay rum and Jim Beam in which he almost smellably moves; and it

is dropped. Perhaps the clinching point about Rhett is that Melanie Wilkes likes and respects him; and, since she is arguably the worst judge of character since Duncan in *Macbeth*, that is the kiss of death.

But of course this is not at all what the film intends (to come back to the awkward but indispensable verb). And here again we confront the problem that it is working within a frame of values which, nowadays, even quite conservative people find it impossible to take with the naive earnestness with which they are, often unctuously, offered. Much of what I described as humour in the early sequences, as farce or self-parody, perhaps only seems so because that is the sole mode in which it is now intelligible, since no sane producer — and David O. Selznick was eminently sane! — would have set up a film that deliberately and ostentatiously offended the sensibilities of its target-audience. Yet maybe the attempted deconstructiveness of *Duel in the Sun*, seven years later, might make us wonder about uneasinesses in Selznick's perception of various American dreams — misgivings, 'obstinate questionings,' that he couldn't afford to admit (even to himself?) in *Gone with the Wind* and which therefore show up as unevennesses of tone, ambiguities, incoherences. This is of course the purest speculation; but we might recall *Rebecca* — also produced and invigilated by Selznick in 1939 — where what we have is two films superimposed on each other. In one (a romantic melodrama) the naive heroine, who lacks an identity as she lacks a name, and the bruised and brooding but mutely dashing hero, finally succeed in *legally* burying the vicious Rebecca, aided by the (?Lesbian) Mrs. Danvers's convenient self-immolation. In the other film, the dead but never to be buried Rebecca exposes *d'outré-tombe* the shallowness, nastiness and even corruptness of the stifling English society (God's own country in one film, Chamberlain's in the other) whose omnipotent and patriarchal God had appropriately punished her with cancer there where she had sinned, in her womb. But which of these films is really Selznick's — or Hitchcock's — is anybody's guess.

In *Gone with the Wind* one is finally left with a jumble of fragments, confused intentions further muddled by our own inability to 'read' some of them except in ways that make them absolutely bizarre. And in this respect, *Gone with the Wind* is typical of those kinds of artworks which are so much of their day that they speak to ours only in faint and distorted whispers, particularly when they reach us through the complex perspectives, personal and historical, which I sketched (in my own private version) at the beginning of this essay, or rather of this series of inconclusive interrogations.

Note: I have received encouragement, and annexed ideas, from Graham Burns, Judy Goldberg and Robin Wood. My thanks to them all.



# IKIRU:

## The Role of Women in a Male Narrative

by  
**Elen A. Bovkis**

*Life is so short,  
Fall in love, dear maiden,  
While your hair is still black,  
Before your heart stops —  
For there will be no more tomorrow.<sup>1</sup>*

Most of Kurosawa's films are expressively masculine. They are shot in a direct, strong, forceful style of great virtuosity and he favours men as the main characters. The *jidai-geki* (or period films) are filled with action and adventure centred on heroic figures: *The Seven Samurai*, *The Hidden Fortress*. The *gendai-geki* (films in a modern setting) are also about heroes although in a more contemporary sense: *High and Low*, *Ikiru*. His work differs from Ozu's, where the action is almost non-existent, whether in the performance of the characters or in the camera movement. It also differs from Mizoguchi's work, who conveys his narratives through beautifully flowing arrangements. Unlike them Kurosawa cuts, wipes, moves right in; his images are "in the face" of the viewer in such a tight way that viewers cannot escape — there is no place into which they could avert their gaze.



Watanabe visits Kuroe-cho.

<sup>1</sup> The second verse of the theme song. *Ikiru*, a film by A. Kurosawa, *Modern Film Scripts*, (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1952) p.45.



Yet his work, while not subtle in appearance, is far from being simplistic, or flatly arrogant. The complexity of his characters, in my view, becomes subtle, precisely because of the style in which he films. The style is so overpowering that we get lost in it, taking the visual images as the only things to deal with. Yet there is another, subtextual level, which lies below the strength of the expression. The viewers have to watch his films even more alertly, because they have to penetrate the “front” curtain, which in itself so completely carries the film that it is easy to be fooled by it. The complexity of Kurosawa’s work is far-reaching and can only be compared to the great masters of world cinema.

In *Ikiru*, one comes to realize that, although the main character of the film is Watanabe, his actions and main self-realizations and achievements seem to be directed or prompted by women. Each major turn in Watanabe’s life is connected to his encounters with women. Although none of them is a main character (with rare exceptions Kurosawa’s main characters are men: *Seven Samurai*, *High and Low*, *Throne of Blood*, and even *Rashomon*, although here one of the four main characters is a woman) the women are of major importance. The women involved are: Ms. Odagiri, the clerk who works in his office; the group of women from Kuroe-cho asking for the cleaning up of dirty/polluted water, the woman of loose behaviour, and, in an indirect way, the wife of Watanabe’s older brother. I discount his daughter-in-law, as she is not portrayed as an independent individual, but rather as an extension of his son. Also, I will touch upon the technical aspect of the film in connection to the narrative, tracing the camera work and the lighting in the scenes in which the women are involved.

After briefly being introduced to Watanabe, which by the way was done through introduction of his insides before his outsides<sup>2</sup>, we get a pretty clear idea of how this man leads his life. He is a living “mummy” — a nickname given to him by Ms. Odagiri — and he is not aware that life is passing him by. He has been engrossed in the same routine for almost thirty years and lives his life mechanically. His first prickling of consciousness takes place through Ms. Odagiri, who plays a very important role in Watanabe’s life later. Here she laughs at a joke, which no other clerk seems to find funny, but which sums up the kind of existence and the kind of attitude prevailing in this office. The joke goes over Watanabe’s head at this point, but he remembers it later in the film and connects it to himself. So in this vast room of men, there is one female clerk and she stands out with her vivaciousness, liveliness, and laughter.

Prelude to ‘Night-town’: Watanabe’s meeting with the novelist (Yunosuke Ito).





She represents something in life which is missing in everybody else. Her voice is clear and her laughter is shrill and buoyant, like that of a happy child. It contrasts sharply with Watanabe's phlegmatic voice.

After reading the joke she bursts out laughing and immediately wipes the smile off her face, because it is totally inappropriate in the surroundings. She hides her face with a sheet, peeking out at the others, and it seems that she is hiding not because she misbehaved, but because her laughter needs to be protected, before it is killed by the type of attitude prevailing here. Watanabe clearly hears the joke, and gives her attention by listening and even contemplating it, but there is no reaction from him at all. She is incomprehensible to him and he does not relate to her. It is not hard to see why — Ms. Odagiri is a complete opposite of Watanabe; she is joyful, lively, expressive, while he is dull, slow, without any particular emotion. She is there to show how life could be lived. With her joke she creates a little bit of noise, a ripple of life, which is subsequently extended by the women from Kuroe-cho as they create much more noise in the office with their loud protests.

The women from Kuroe-cho represent the second female interference into the dullness of the male life portrayed here. They come to ask about cleaning the dirty/polluted water, where, while playing, a child got a rash. They are unsophisticated women, who are asking for the social conditions to be improved for the better of the community. One of them is carrying a child on her back. These women are a crucial factor in the film, as they are the ones who begin the spinning of the wheel which will eventually give meaning to Watanabe's life. Yet, at this point, he cannot recognize that which they represent and we see that he misses his (deeper) connection to them because he (on the narrative level) passes their request to another department.

The women obediently go from one department to another dealing with male-dominated bureaucracy. Kurosawa shows here that the men run the life of these women as they are the ones to decide whether or not things will be done and how they will be done. The women have no say in the matter — Kurosawa conveys that by never showing them throughout the sequence; we only see endless faces of the officials who are all men. When the women are sent back to Watanabe, to the very beginning of the cycle, with no results and no answers, they explode in protest. They are protesting the kind of system set up here, and the men are taken aback. They do not know how to deal with such protests. The established routine has been running for so long — attested by the amount of paper stacks and old records filling the frame from top to bottom in the background and foreground — that any change in that routine seems inconceivable.

As Kurosawa separates the women's running around from one official to another with hard wipes and straight cuts, and as he does not indicate how much time has passed, we assume that it is all happening in the same time frame. Only when we hear that Watanabe is not there, and his chair is shown empty, do we realize that we are now in a different time frame. Kurosawa goes beyond the accepted temporal codes in a technically very elegant way that nonetheless foregrounds the abruptness of the ellipse.<sup>3</sup>

It is very important that precisely at this moment of the women's protest Watanabe is missing. He is not yet ready to recognize his own uselessness or his "death" while still being alive. His routine, therefore, does not get disturbed at this point. He needs to feel "a lot more pain in his belly" before he can wake up to life, as attested by the narrator.

The wheel is set spinning, but Watanabe is not yet aware of it. He walks around carrying his own stomach pain, ignorant of what is happening outside or inside of him — the problems that women raise, his relationship with his own son, the cancer in his stomach.

The third female to appear is the wife of his brother. Apparently Watanabe visited his brother's family, but did not speak of what bothered him. At that time he had already learned about his disease. The brother immediately assumes that he came to ask for money and withdraws. Later he will begin guessing that maybe Watanabe has a mistress, yet his wife insists that something else is happening. On a purely instinctive level she feels that something is wrong. As the conversation takes place without Watanabe's presence he never learns of it and therefore he cannot ask the woman for the comfort he so needs at this point. Himself so unaware, he could not possibly see that someone else, a woman, could see or feel things.

Watanabe then goes drinking. Together with the writer of the cheap novels he encounters a whole different set of women of whose existence he was probably altogether unaware. They are all lively; the scenes are shot with incredible energy, with lots of dancing, laughing, drinking and shouting. Seduction, cheating and manipulation are all around. Watanabe, however, does not seem to be particularly touched by it. Within this hellish turmoil he seems to gain no com-

<sup>2</sup> Carl Jung divides everything into opposites: outside/inside, yang/yin, conscious/unconscious, masculine/feminine. I find that Watanabe's introduction is done from the deep and hidden insides or the feminine aspect of self, of which Watanabe is unaware. The feminine helps him to get in touch with the masculine, in other words to become conscious.

<sup>3</sup> Noel Burch praises Kurosawa for employing but surpassing the Hollywood cinematic codes.



seductive: Watanabe gasps and his wide open mouth expels some kind of a comical sound. When she takes off her garment, however, Kurosawa moves the camera away from her onto the faces of the writer and Watanabe. I don't think it is out of consideration for the woman (as in Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatari* in the case of naked Lady Wasaka) — after all it is a strip bar. Rather he directs the attention of the viewer away from the women, at the same time not denying the effect they produce on Watanabe — he almost chokes. The same idea prevails throughout the film: women are in the subordinate roles, yet they are the major propelling factors, causing the pivoting changes in Watanabe's life.

The richness of the shooting of the night scenes evokes *film noir*. The direction of the movement seems to be geometrically designed<sup>4</sup> — from right to left, from left to right, up and down the stairs, forward and backward — attesting to Kurosawa's sense of cinematic 'architecture'. Throughout the film Kurosawa creates not only visual oppositions/parallels, but narrative ones as well. Kurosawa penetrates to the

...depths of the human heart as if with a surgeon's scalpel, laying bare its dark complexities and bizarre twists. These strange impulses of the human heart [are] expressed through the use of an elaborately fashioned play of light and shadow.<sup>5</sup>

In this night sequence Watanabe and the writer are seen through various fences and partitions: firstly the fence is made out of smaller squares, then larger ones, and later circles. When they are in a bar, we see them through swinging partitions. All of these designs create turbulence, a dizzying effect, which complements the atmosphere perfectly. The mood is completely different when, again at night, Watanabe is swinging in the playground. Watanabe sings the same song he sang in the bar (quoted at the head of this article), except that he is now happy, not sad. Here we see him through a children's maze, which is also made out of squares, except that they are multi-dimensional. His one-dimensional, flat, agitated way of being has transformed into a meaningful, peaceful life, full of depth.

Within the commotion of the night scene a significant incident takes place: a young woman with a cigarette hanging from a corner of her mouth takes Watanabe's hat and swiftly moves off. She might be a prostitute or a swindler and she wants to lure Watanabe into her trap, into which he would have fallen if not for the warning of his newfound friend, the writer. However, he is forced to purchase a new hat, and the hat becomes a symbol, a turning point, a motif which recurs throughout the rest of the film. In this intricate way it is a woman again who is responsible for the change. Her movement, swift and arrogant, is so direct that it requires some kind of action from Watanabe. It

perks him up, alerts him, upsets him and takes him down an unfamiliar road. It does not matter that he does not choose to drink and dance, but he tries something new, and something of that newness remains with him the next day — the hat. It is clearly different from his usual attire: it is loud, modern and it attracts attention. From this point on, Watanabe also becomes much more visible.

Ms. Odagiri, who comes to get his seal in order to resign, is the first one to be fooled by the hat. She almost does not recognize Watanabe. And after spending the whole day with him she actually does not recognize the man she thought she knew. She learns of a totally new and unexpected part of Watanabe — he is not a dull man, he has a sense of humour, he is playful, caring and generous. No wonder he does not want to go back to the office which caused his liveliness to die. In the words of Ms. Odagiri: "After thirty years he deserves some kind of rest".

Ms. Odagiri is fooled by the hat. The rest of the people are fooled by Ms. Odagiri and Watanabe holding hands, completely misinterpreting their reason for doing so. Like his older brother, most others can only see Ms. Odagiri as Watanabe's mistress. Yet for Watanabe this relationship is built on totally different motivation: he sees her as his teacher, as an ideal, as life. As they walk in the street, Ms. Odagiri is completely covered by the sun, while Watanabe is in the shadow created by the building. After a while they switch sides and then both of them walk out into the sun. The night before he was in the company of the writer who took him into the "night" life. That outing did little for Watanabe. Now he and Ms. Odagiri are in the "day" life. Her company will prove much more fruitful.

Let us come back to Ms. Odagiri's request for Watanabe's seal in order to resign. When asked why she wants to resign, she simply answers that the place does not suit her, and she is horrified that anyone could stay there for almost thirty years. Actually, the fact that Watanabe stayed in one place for thirty years seems to be his biggest achievement — not the work itself. It is as if Watanabe can now hear what she is saying as his consciousness has been awakened by all the previous inci-







This still, though not in the film, epitomizes Watanabe's relationship with Toyo Odagiri

dents - the discovery of cancer, overhearing the conversation of his son with his daughter-in-law, the night life, the discovery of distance between himself and his son.

Another important realization comes to Watanabe through Ms. Odagiri. He complains about his son to her, but she unexpectedly takes his son's side. She tells him that his son did not ask Watanabe to sacrifice anything for him, it was of Watanabe's doing, and now he should not talk of his son badly. These wise words coming out of the mouth of the child are shocking to Watanabe and he is left speechless. As Ms. Odagiri asserts that he loves his son and gives him one of her radiant smiles, understanding settles within him. Although he never seems to forgive his son for the distance and seeming lack of care for his father, his awareness seems to continue to expand owing to a woman's point of view. The camera moves closer and closer onto Watanabe's face to an extreme close-up as he realizes what she is saying.

<sup>4</sup> Noel Burch's formulation.

<sup>5</sup> Akira Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, trans. by Audie E. Bock, (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1982).





Watanabe, played by Takashi Shimura, the moral centre of many Kurosawa movies (e.g. *Rashomon*, *The Seven Samurai*)

Having placed the seal on the “wrong” document (alluding either to the idea that Ms. Odagiri worked in a wrong place for her or that this office is full of “wrong”, or yet that it does not really matter which form is being used as nothing seems to really matter in this place), he does not let go of Ms. Odagiri, but asks her to spend the day with him. He buys her stockings, takes her places, feeds her — anything to keep her around to be able at least to look at that which he himself lost. He is hungry for her youth and her vitality.

Meanwhile Ms. Odagiri changes her work place. From a dull and sleepy office she moves into a fast, noisy, vibrating environment. Even the windows are visibly vibrating with energy — the useless waste of time is inconceivable here. It is here that Watanabe asks her out again. Although Ms. Odagiri begins to get weary of him, she grants him one last evening. I find that significant in the way that only in his last year of life something begins to stir in him. And in this last meeting a realization of enormous proportions for Watanabe hits him: it is not too late, he can still do something good in his life. He decides to take care of the polluted water, build a park and create a

playground there. His life suddenly becomes important once more. He finds meaning, usefulness, inspiration. Inadvertently Ms. Odagiri turns his life around. It happens in the birthday celebration scene. This birthday scene is the key scene in the film. It is interesting to note that as the group sing happy birthday, clearly symbolizing the rebirth of Watanabe, the actual birthday person is another woman. A young woman, close to the age of Ms. Odagiri, ascends the stairs just as he is running out.

Back at the office Watanabe is unrecognizable. He is no longer part of the paper chase and of the routine, he is rising above them all; he is active, positive, determined. And as he goes through the same run around the group of women went through in the beginning of the film, the women follow him, supporting him, and hoping that maybe something can actually be done. The opposition encountered from the male world is enormous, yet at this point Watanabe has nothing to lose, only to gain, and he tirelessly charges forward.

At the site where the park is to be constructed, under the heavy rain (Kurosawa loves shots of heavy



rain), Watanabe walks right through the muddy water, with a beautiful vision in his eyes, while all the other officials stand away from the mud, covered against the rain. One of the women runs after him with an open umbrella trying to shield him. Later Watanabe comes to check on the progress of work and there he feels ill, loses his balance and falls down. The co-worker who stands beside him stares in total surprise and disbelief, yet does not move an inch to help him. Again, the women are the ones to help him up and give him water. As he drinks the water, the sun reflected in the ripples dances on his cheeks, illuminating his face and giving him a special glow, which stays with him even after he has lowered the cup down.

The same glow can be seen on Watanabe's portrait at the wake. He seems to be younger on it, but it is irrelevant as the idea behind it is that he now faces the world straight on, as opposed to the constant bent down head. He has a small smile, small enough to make his lips normal instead of drooping. He seems to be happy in the picture. Ironically we get to see this kind of a face only after he dies. Prior to that Watanabe walked with his head bent forward so low that his face was almost invisible, as if he was carrying such a heavy load on his shoulders that he was unable to look forward. His vision therefore was limited to just what was "under his feet". He was slow and looked older than he was. His lips were puffed and drooping, making his frontal face look like a flat fish. His voice was low and dull, as if coming from a grave. He spoke in a slow manner, taking long breaks in between his sentences and even between his words. He looked and acted like a dead man; no wonder Ms. Odagiri nicknames him a "mummy".

After his death, Watanabe gets no credit for the work he did to create the park. The credit is stolen by the mayor, and although other men know differently no one dares or feels it necessary to put the facts right. Again, the women who began the cycle come in unexpectedly, and, without uttering a word, in their grief and sorrow, show everyone who the maker of the park really is. The men are embarrassed, they all look down. Kurosawa films the faces of the same officials that before ran these women around, except that this time they all shamefully cast their eyes down. Only Watanabe (in the portrait) looks straight at them and smiles. Kurosawa moves in three jump cuts into an extreme close up of Watanabe's face. At this moment the mayor can no longer deal with it and he hurriedly leaves. After that the men start coming out with their stories of what they knew, noticed and observed. By the end of the day, drunk and inspired, they vow to continue Watanabe's ways of work.

I want to draw on several examples of the stylistic oppositions specifically to do with women. Let us look again at the birthday scene. As Watanabe realizes that he can still do something in the little time he has left, he grabs the bunny made by Ms. Odagiri and rushes down the stairway, while the group is singing the "happy birthday" song. The stairway is very prominent in this particular shot: it might be said to represent the canal of birth, and we see Watanabe descending it. Later there is another stairway in the film, which leads to the office of the mayor. In this case Watanabe is ascending the stairs and the women from Kuroe-cho are ascending with him. He is walking briskly, with determination and with purpose. The women are behind him as his supporters. Because of the women's presence it is now possible for Watanabe to ascend, to rise, to go up and finally raise his head.<sup>6</sup>

Another opposition can be seen in the two restaurant scenes: in the first one Watanabe sits on the right and Ms. Odagiri on the left. The scene is filled with laughter and light. It is shot in deep focus: we see the protagonists in the foreground, a woman reading in the central background, another woman working just behind her, and pedestrians in the extreme background walking in the street. It is in this scene that Watanabe learns something about himself, which comes as a shocking realization: he is being called a "mummy", a dead person, while he is still alive. He is humble in receiving this knowledge; an insight and understanding come to him here.

In the second — the birthday — scene, also shot in deep focus, Watanabe and Ms. Odagiri sit on the left and on the right respectively, and the atmosphere is very heavy, ironically intensified by the birthday party. An even bigger realization comes to him here: he still has time to do something meaningful. His life completely turns around at this precise point.

This scene is created with many simultaneous levels of action interwoven in most intricate ways. It is shot in deep focus. In the background there is a birthday party going on. In the foreground we see young lovers holding hands. Between the two pleasant happenings Watanabe and Ms. Odagiri sit in extreme discomfort, both for very different reasons. Pleasure (the party and the lovers) and discomfort (Ms. Odagiri and Watanabe) are prominent simultaneously in this scene and the two extreme emotions resonate on its intense split between the two central figures. The scene begins from a low point, then, when Watanabe confesses his

<sup>6</sup> I do not know whether or not this is a coincidence, but if it is it is an interesting one. The name of Ms. Odagiri has the word giri in it, which means duty. She is the major inspiration for Watanabe to fulfil his duty in his field of work.



illness, it dips even lower, yet it ends with a transformational, albeit difficult uplift.

Just as Kurosawa films in a strong, direct manner, he also uses strong symbolic language. Some of the more prominent symbols can be read in comparing Ms. Odagiri's healthy appetite with Watanabe's inability to eat; the cancer is in the digestive system, in other words in the very core which feeds and nourishes the body — it is the soul of the physical body and Watanabe actually connects his pain to that of his soul. Other symbols are seen in the hat, nicknames, the stockings, the park, portrait, cancer as decay and corruption in the socio/political climate, the "happy birthday" song, the "Life is So Short" song and many more. I want to stress that the song "Life is So Short" is dedicated to a maiden, symbolically affirming the link between Watanabe and women. Although the song urges the maiden to live her life fully before it is too late, it is actually the women who prod Watanabe to do so.

Women are never illuminated excessively. Overall they seem to be in the shadows, except for the shots of Ms. Odagiri in the street, where she is flooded with sunlight. Her smile alone is as bright as the sunshine. Both the wife of his son and the wife of his brother are presented in a neutral light, while the group of women from Kuroe-cho are darkly lit, dressed in dark clothes. Except Ms. Odagiri, the women are not acknowledged for who they are and what they represent. The men in the film are not quite "aware" of them and their importance.

In the third part of the film, which takes place at the wake, Kurosawa uses flashbacks to fill the gaps in what happened before Watanabe died: different people retell the story from their point of view. The memory is slow to return. After one person speaks, another's memory is triggered. Stories are disconnected, yet overall they create a full account. Not one of the flashbacks, or stories, comes from the women. The men, like Watanabe himself, were oblivious to what was happening and only now are trying to understand it. The women, on the other hand, were there while he was still alive. They don't need to go through the agonizing question: "But why did he change so suddenly?" They were the ones who caused the change, and they were by his side while he lived his new life.

This film, very much like *Rashomon*, *High and Low* and *The Seven Samurai*, ends with a kind of transformation and disappointment at the same time. Disappointment, however, seems to carry more weight. In *Rashomon* we are moved by the woodcutter's generosity in adopting the abandoned baby, yet at the same time the murder of the nobleman horrifies us and we are dismayed by the beggar's laughter. In *High and Low* we are touched by Gondo's willingness to risk

everything he has in order to save his chauffeur's son, yet the reality of the class difference undermines this. Similarly in *The Seven Samurai*, there is the joy of the farmers, but the samurai who are still alive are left dislocated, with no prospects in the future, and ignored now that their usefulness has ended. In *Ikiru*, as well, fulfilment mixes with discouragement. Watanabe realizes, if only at the end, his own worth and finds meaning in life. The women were the ones to start the spinning of the wheel, they also rendered their support, they were the ones to inspire Watanabe, and they were the ones to acknowledge his work and give him the credit he deserved. Watanabe discovered a nurturing and fulfilling relationship with the women and, through them, with himself. But the rest of the world remains cold and uncaring. Only Kimura, the man who stood up for Watanabe at the wake, tries to live up to the promise they all made. But even he cannot stand up to all the other men, he lacks that courage. In the last shot of the film Kimura stands on the bridge which overlooks the playground in the park. His body language becomes similar to Watanabe's: his head droops and his walk becomes slow and old. Kimura becomes the shadow of Watanabe — he reaches out for the fleeting dream but ends up crushed by the decaying system. Watanabe was able to break out of the claws of the system, yet overall it remains unchanged. The famous line usually associated with Ozu's films is suitable here as well: life is disappointing, isn't it?

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# PERSONA SYCHOANALYSED



## EDITOR'S NOTE:

Göran Persson was not a professional film critic but a prominent Swedish psychiatrist with an interest in film in general and a longstanding preoccupation with Bergman in particular. We met in Lund some thirty-five years ago; he was Best Man at my wedding, and we sustained a friendship (over increasing distance and numerous disagreements) ever since. I think this article — the fruit of an intense involvement with *Persona* since the film's release — may bring us into more intimate contact with the workings of the inner processes of Bergman's art than any other writing on the film with which I am familiar.

I have made no editorial changes to the article besides (with surprising infrequency) rendering the English more idiomatic, I hope without distorting the sense. I have disobeyed Göran's instructions in one particular only: he presented the last two sections as *alternative* endings, and asked me to choose between them. Finding both of great interest, with no duplication of ideas, I have decided that both should be included.

I present this article with pride and grief, a memorial to a fine and sensitive mind that has been a formative influence on my own development. It is Göran's final work. Some months ago, after a long history of ill health, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor and the condition pronounced irreversible. He died in April.

ROBIN WOOD



# BERGMAN'S PERSONA: Rites of Spring as a Chamber Play



Bibi Andersson as Alma.



Liv Ullmann as Eli

**by** Göran Persson

*The immediate impulse to the writing of this article came when reading Robin Wood's revisit to Persona, Cineaction 34, 59-67, 1994, with great interest, and a growing sense of missing what the film was about. Like good criticism it sent me back on my own revisit, or rather series of revisits. Persona has been a difficult film, since the first time I saw it. It is so obviously a masterpiece, but at the same time it is very difficult to react to, giving rise to feeling uneasy, cold, cutoff, worried, perhaps ashamed of yourself, or frightened in some vague and unspecific way, which seems unjustified, as the film is in one way so simple and clear. I know that my reaction is a rather typical one. After seeing the film a considerable number of times, and discovering obvious things, my reactions are now very different.*

By rites of spring I mean stages in the development of a person from desires to merge with someone all powerful to being able to enjoy standing alone, from symbiosis to individuation.



## The Prologue — or who is the old woman?

**T**he prologue of *Persona* has been described as a confusing mixture of pictures, as a play before the play, as a summary of the history of film, as a summary of the films of Bergman himself, or as an overture, presenting the coming themes of the film (Koskinen M. *Spel och speglingar. En studie i Ingmar Bergman's filmiska estetik*. Ph.D. Thesis, Stockholm: 1993). Bergman himself has called it the impatience of the film to get started (Björkman S., Manns T., Sima J. *Bergman om Bergman*. Stockholm: 1970).

The prologue, that is what happens before the start of the credits, consists roughly of four parts, with one overlap. The first part consists of pictures of the details of the film projector at work, of the film strip, and of the light it throws. The second part consists of a series of pictures separated by periods of white light. The first picture shows, upside down, a cartoon of a woman devoting herself to the innocent activity of washing herself. Then we see the hands of a young child making movements as if washing themselves. Activities that are hygienic and guileless, or perhaps contain a desire to get rid of a sense of guilt? A lively scene with a chase in which a man takes refuge in his bed follows, and death is involved. The movements are as in a silent movie, jerky and mechanical, and funny in that way, but as pointed out: death is present. Then follows a close-up of a spider. It crawls slowly upward, giving a feeling of uneasiness. And then comes the slaughter of the lamb. At first we see old hands in the lamb's hair, and the blood running out, followed by the observations of the eye of the animal, perhaps to see if the pupil does not react, to be sure that the animal is dead, and then the body is cut open, and we see various intestines. "Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi?" The close-up of the hand with the nail driven through it ends this second part. Associations to crucifixion are obvious, but the very closeness and intensity of the picture makes us experience the pain rather than think about salvation from our sins. In the copy I have at my disposal, and in many other copies, the picture of the erect penis is removed. If inserted, it may tell what the guilt refers to ("And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked..."). And perhaps why the hand is punished. The third part of the prologue starts with the picture of the park: trees, and snow on the ground, partly melted away. In the middle of the picture two trees, rather close to each other, without snow around or between them. Then the picture of a building with a railing. And a cut to an extreme

close-up of the face of a dead (?) woman, after which follows a picture of a young boy lying in a bed that gives an impression of belonging to a hospital. Then several pictures of the woman, giving the impression of being taken at slightly different times: in an earlier picture a hand hangs limply, in a later picture the hands are put together. Then it starts to ring, an alarm clock, or a telephone. And suddenly, in a very brief shot, the dead (?) woman stares, and we are in the fourth part of the prologue. There are sounds of drops falling, as if snow were melting, preparing the way for spring. In the fourth part of the prologue the boy we already met appears. He moves restlessly around on his bed, tries to cut out the world by drawing the blanket over his head, reads Lermontov's *Hero for Our Time*, and then turns towards the screen, reaching out towards it. A 180 degree turn around shows what he is trying to study. Female faces, out of focus, and what he sees is the face of Alma, Elisabet, Alma, and Elisabet again, and finally Elisabet closes her eyes, with an enigmatic smile.

One interpretative possibility is that the second part of the prologue is a dream of the boy. He seems to be in prepuberty, and sexual desires may have started to make themselves felt, which give rise to guilt feelings in a Lutheran, sex-negative culture. The third part may also be a dream, or a memory, or a fantasy about something that had happened, or might have happened. I take it, as have several other writers (for instance Lucy Fischer: "The Lives of Performers: The Actress as a Signifier" in *Shot/Countershot. Film Tradition and Women's Cinema*, Princeton: 1989, p. 74) that the boy is the son of Elisabet. Based on the fact that he was given to be taken care of by "a nanny and relatives," I take it that the old woman of the third part of the prologue is the relative, and that she has just died. The opening of her eyes may be taken as meaning that her influence continues. Her death activated the guilt feelings of the boy. The dawning of his sexuality is a sign that paradise is lost: death is introduced into the world. He is eager to grow, but the growth of one implies the death of others. Thus there is an existential guilt, painful and inevitable. And the boy is left alone, and has to turn to his mother, the memory of whom he has tried to repress (pictures out of focus), in order to avoid the pain of the memory of being rejected by her. But now, when the grandmother figure is dead, he has to come to grips with his mother and her behaviour, and he takes help from the mother's nurse. This three-generation perspective (the boy, his mother, and a grandmother figure) can also be found in the published manuscript of *Persona*, dated before the start of the film (Bergman I. *Persona*. Stockholm: Norstedts, 1996). In the manuscript, which does not contain a prologue, it is



Elisabet, the mother, and not Alma, the nurse, who breaks down. When expressing her confusion verbally she does not speak in her own voice, but with a plaintive, aged voice. The three generations are there, but in a form that is even more concealed and indirect than in the film.

### The Credits

The credits are broken up by flashes of pictures. Two of them present Alma, two Elisabet, some present trees, some the landscapes we are going to see, one the chase from the silent film, now with a policeman included, and no less than nine pictures show the boy. There is no question about it: the film is the boy's.

### The Laughter of Elisabet

Elisabet suffered a loss of speech while enacting the role of Electra, in the play *Electra*, in which the role figure desires the death of her mother, and in which the mother was in fact killed as a result. We are given a flashback of this moment: Elisabet at first looks frightened, as if she tried to fight off something, really struggles, then suddenly starts smiling. We may guess what was happening: the wishes of the role figure suddenly became real to Elisabet, resonating from such wishes against her own mother, awakened by the death of the woman who acted as a mother to her own boy. The terror of discovering that what was in the script was also in her own heart overwhelmed her at first, and the feeling of triumph ("The old witch is dead at last. Serves her right!") gave rise to laughter, both as an expression of the triumph and as a denial: "This is impossible, a ridiculous idea, impossible to take seriously at all!"

The film gives us the chance to witness a second attack of laughter, which Elisabet does not have to suppress, and which appears when she listens to a play on the radio, in which a woman is heard saying: "Forgive me, forgive me, my love, you have to forgive me. I thirst for nothing but your forgiveness. Forgive me, and I will be able to breathe again, and to live... What do you know about mercy, what do you know about the sufferings of a mother, the bleeding pain of a woman." We may guess at another denial of something that is also hurting Elisabet, and which refers to her behaviour in the real world.

### Psychoanalysis from Within

The development of Alma through the film is remarkable. She starts as the 25-year-old nurse with a life before her that is in most aspects very predictable, and a vague sense of uneasiness. At the end of the film much has happened to her.

Her development has taken place in a relationship of a very special kind: a relationship in which one of the partners, in this case Alma herself, is given the possibili-

ty and the responsibility to speak all the time, about whatever comes to her mind, and in which the other partner, in this case Elisabet the actress, who refuses to act any more and who becomes the audience, devotes herself to listening in a thoughtful and neutral way, and withstands any attempts to make her react in a personal way. In short, what we see is the paradigm of a psychoanalysis, with Elisabet as the analyst, and Alma as the analysand. The content of the interaction between the two women follows very closely the trajectory of a classical psychoanalytical treatment. I won't use any technical terminology, neither from Freud or Mahler, nor Lacan, but will stick to a concrete description of the film: it shows a desire in Alma to merge with someone whom she regards as great, noble, famous, and whom she regards as all-powerful, and her fight to bring about this merging. The result of her experiences is the reluctant, and finally positive, giving up of the desire to merge, and the acceptance of individuation, that is the realization that she is a separate person, that Elisabet is an ordinary human being and no goddess, and that she, Alma, is a person in her own right, who has no need to become an Elisabet, in order to be someone of value.

The desire to merge is at first rather unconscious, and expressed as an admiration for Elisabet, as an actress. It is expressed in the choice of hats, shown in the first shots at the summer house: similar in form, different in colour. Alma shares what she reads with Elisabet, a piece written in pure Bergmanese (an easily recognized Swedish dialect): "The immense cry of our faith and our doubts against darkness and silence is one of the most horrible testimonies of our forsakenness and our terrified unvoiced knowledge." This quotation gives a good picture of the experience you have when you believe that you need to merge in order to survive, and the subject you want to merge with, such as God in an earlier film or Elisabet in this film, is impossible to reach — is darkness and silence. The knowledge of the impossibility of really merging must be suppressed all the time, and when you do not succeed in suppressing it there is desperation. Alma goes on to share another dream of merging: of being part of an organization, feeling a call for something, such as being a nurse, which is bigger than the individual (another example of the desire was expressed by Bergman in his speech at the reception of the Erasmus prize in Amsterdam in 1965: to be an anonymous sculptor taking part in the building of a medieval cathedral). Alma continues by telling about her very first sexual relation, with a married man, which went on for five years. In a way it was never real, at least not for the man, but her pain was very real. It was her first love, and perhaps, Alma tells, you love only once in your life. In parenthesis: the first man in the life of many women is her father, and when a married,



older man is the first lover it may be a sign of continued attraction to him. Alma feels very happy about being listened to by the famous actress. She always wanted a sister. She has seven brothers, but no sister. She goes on to tell about the orgy on the beach. The orgy is not quite as outrageous as described by Robin Wood (Wood R. *Persona Revisited*. *Cineaction* 1994; 34, 59-67): Alma had intercourse with one of the boys only, and the beach was regarded as sheltered and private, but the scene is of course outrageous enough. She tells about her abortion, starts to cry, and does not understand herself: it was nothing after all. Elisabet comforts her, taking her into her arms. She then tells Elisabet that she saw her on a film, and discovered that they were similar, and Alma is convinced that she could become like Elisabet, if she worked hard. Here her desire to merge is expressed in a sublimated way: to become similar, not identical, and to do so by hard work. Rather intoxicated, Alma half-dozes, and Elisabet tells her to go to bed. After a moment Alma repeats the suggestion, and leaves. During the night, the desire to merge gets some more direct satisfaction. Elisabet comes into the room of Alma, leaves, but returns when she observes that Alma is awake. She takes Alma into her arms, the two women look at the screen, as if it was a mirror, as if to affirm their closeness, and Elisabet caresses Alma. The following day Elisabet denies, by shaking her head or looking amused, that she said anything to Alma, or visited her during the night.

Alma dresses in a shiny, black, raincoat, and offers to post Elisabet's letters. The letter Elisabet is just finishing, to the psychiatrist, does not get sealed. Alma sees her chance to find out something about the thoughts of Elisabet, and reads the letter. There is no sign of the desired sister, mother, friend or lover, but only of a rather remote, neutral and somewhat entertained observer, who not only summarizes the confessions of Alma, but also observes her loving emotions in a detached, amused way. The rage against being rejected, of not being seen as an

equal, of not being worthy, of not being allowed to merge fills Alma. She leaves the car, and there is that remarkable shot of her in the shiny black raincoat, with the mirror image in the pond. It is often shown, it is brilliant, and it is difficult to establish contact with. It is a picture of the hatred of someone who has just understood that she is left alone, deserted, of strong, immediate and impenetrable hatred, impenetrable because of the fact that the omnipotence from the infantile experience of merging is still there, and because of the fact that the desperation, humiliation and devastation have not made themselves felt, yet. Many people become stuck at this stage, and they can be very dangerous. On the soundtrack, however, there is the sound of drops of water falling, as in spring, when snow is thawing away. The breakdown of the desire to merge has started, the breakdown of the unrealistic, infantile desires.



Elisabet as Electra: the start of the silence.



Alma drinks out of a glass, sits down with it outside the house, and breaks the glass as she puts on her hat. She takes up the splinters, and then discovers that she forgot one of them. Horrified, she observes that she is waiting for Elisabet to get it into her foot. When this has happened Alma is seen inside the house, and then a thin veil is drawn away from in front of her face, and we understand that there was a veil before, which we hardly saw. And the film breaks down.

Many observers have pointed out that it is as if the film could no longer bear the intensity of the emotions. In the present reading the breakdown of the projection is equal to the breakdown of the complacent idea that the surface is all there is. After having discovered the evil impulses in herself against someone she also loves, Alma can no longer see the world in the same way. Her unconscious has broken through, and she cannot deny what she has seen. She cannot immediately build up a new world, thus everything goes blank. This is what happens in a psychoanalysis, after such a breakthrough. The experiences during the analytic hours then periodically tend to lose their clear demarcations: it is no longer clear what is from the present and what is from the past, and what is mixture between them. It is not clear what happened in reality, and what was only wished for, or dreamt, and what is a combination. It is not clear what is within the ego, and what is without. This state reins within the analytic sessions, while outside them there are no such difficulties, in a subject who has a strong ego, with a good ability to re-establish the difference between wish fulfilments and dreams on one hand, and the reality on the other, and is thus well suited to the analytic process. The film shows in an admirably exact and clear way how the analytic experiences are structured. The film shows, sometimes in action, emotional developments which in the analytic hours would have been expressed in words only. What happens in a psychoanalysis is a shortened and intensified form of courses of events which took place during previous, especially early, life. This is what happens in the film, but the film is also a tale about what took place between nurse Alma and actress Elisabet.

During a first breakthrough the process may increase the anxiety of the analyst: is the patient perhaps losing contact with reality also outside analysis? In the film Elisabet gets anxious after the first outbreak, and goes looking for Alma, at cliffs from which it had been possible to jump, as an indication of this anxiety.

The struggle to achieve the merging continues with different means. And Alma experiences how she is rejected. There is the long sequence when Alma asks to be forgiven for showing her aggression and disappointment, and demonstrates all her terror of being abandoned. Elisabet marches away, with Alma following her in plead-

ing, suppliant way. Exchange, as is easily done, the grown up Alma with a younger girl, who has just discovered that she has got a will of her own, and has refused to follow mother, and look at the way of walking of Elisabet, and recognise the demonstration of an irritated mother.

It is night and dark. We see the face of Alma. After a while she starts to move rather violently, and then shakes her head quickly and desperately, and then wakes up — from a dream? She listens to the radio, but it does not work well, words come through, but randomly. Alma has gone over to the bed of Elisabet, and we see her with a rather tender expression close to the face of Elisabet, caressing the sleeping woman, but saying "... your face is flabby, and your mouth is swollen and ugly... Soon none of your secrets are left..."

Not long ago, Alma regard Elisabet as much more beautiful than she regarded herself. Now she looks on the face of Elisabet with contempt. She is tearing down her ideal, steering away from the merging.

The cry of Elisabet's husband is heard again. Alma goes out to meet him, and in his black spectacles he refuses to listen to her declarations that she is not Elisabet. He goes on to speak about his tenderness and love, the importance and character of their marriage, asks pleadingly if the sex they just had was good. Elisabet is present all the time, and seems to encourage what happens. Alma acts her role, until she finally breaks down in horror, nausea and a desire to be given an anaesthetic. The level of reality of the scene is uncertain. It may well be a dream Alma just woke from. The content is easily interpreted as a thinly disguised oedipal wish-fulfillment, which broke down into a nightmare when the wish tended to become too obvious. The desire to merge with mother is up against its great obstacle: the daughter is not allowed to share her father with her mother sexually.

Then follows the sequence in *Persona* which is shown twice, first from the point of view of Alma, then from the point of view of Elisabet. Alma describes the development, or rather lack of it, of Elisabet as a mother. She had no desire to become one, but as it was a role that should be played and that was prestigious she decided to act it, but found that she failed, already during the pregnancy, and that she could not stand the boy, whom she had born with great difficulty, who refused to die, and who started to love her. — How does Alma know all this, which apparently is true, given the reactions of Elisabet? Has she been informed by the psychiatrist? We are not told. It is interesting that we, the audience, may have shared the anger of Alma at being "betrayed" to the psychiatrist by Elisabet, but do not reflect on the fact that something similar must have happened against Elisabet. This is an indication that we as audience have formed an identifi-



cation with Alma. — The accusations are in principle the same as are leveled by many teenaged girls against their mothers. ("You do not love me! You wanted me just to be able to call yourself a mother, and were disappointed when I was not the sweet little girl you desired." — Is there a mother who never fitted this description, if only for a second?). And they lead to the dawning of an insight in them as they did in Alma: mothers are not all-powerful beings, and they themselves are not all helpless little angels, but they are both human beings of flesh and blood. This is expressed by the simple metaphor of letting each half of the face of Alma and Elisabet merge into one. The common factor in these two women is a complicated relation to motherhood: apparently a long and painful experience for Elisabet, a quickly repressed, but no less painful experience for Alma. When the merging just mentioned becomes apparent to Alma she vehemently denies it: "No. I am not like you. I will never become..."

After a dissolve Elisabet is seen with eyes downcast, and at a slight sound when Alma appears she very suddenly looks up, as suddenly as the old woman in the prologue did. Alma is again dressed as a nurse, as she was in the first parts of the film, and turns aggressively and accusingly against Elisabet. Alma tells that she has learned much, and that she does not know how long she will manage. She tries desperately to uphold her sense of being separate, again vehemently affirming that she will never become as Elisabet, and that Elisabet will never reach her, however much she will try. This may be seen as a denial of the fact that she was similar to Elisabet with regard to not wanting her child. But it can of course also be an expression of a denial of her remaining intense needs to merge with Elisabet. It is the same thought that many teenage girls have: "I will never, never turn into something even remotely similar to that horrible woman that calls herself my mother." Several pictures show the faces of the two women close to each other, as if maintaining that the separation is far from achieved. Alma starts to hammer on the table with her fists, and

then also loses control over her language, being unable to form grammatically correct sentences, and thus also loses her grip on reality. Words referring to failure, to the loosening of borders, well up, and they all seem to refer to the abortion. If the daughter figure, Alma, now looks with abhorrence on the risk of merging, the mother figure, Elisabet, on the other hand, discovers in her daughter an accomplice. The daughter also represents the continuation of life, and the mother wants to be part of it, and the means is by being part of the life of her daughter. Now Elisabet wants to merge, and when Alma scratches her forearm Elisabet sucks the blood of Alma with an expression of lust. There is a new violent fight between the two women, which intensifies, until blackened out.

And then follows the scene in which Alma is tending Elisabet in the hospital, exactly as she did at the start of the film. But there is a difference. She is now teaching Elisabet to say "Nothing," and Elisabet, who looks almost dead, with a limp and helpless body, does say "Nothing," after a great exertion, but very obediently. It is the second time in the film she speaks. And then Alma says, with tenderness: "Good. Now it is good. This is how it should be." What is the status of this scene? The next scene in the film shows Alma waking up suddenly, looking up as if she had overslept, and it thus seems logical to interpret what we saw as a dream. A dream that expresses the desire to repress what was



Alma with Elisabet's husband (Gunnar Björnstrand).



discovered during the time in the summer-house: by the word "nothing," and by regressing in time to the point when nothing had in fact been revealed yet. This desire to repress all painful insights is a desire that can also be seen at the end of a psychoanalysis.

When Alma looks around, she finds Elisabet, dressed up, with a collected and efficient appearance, finishing her packing before driving away from the summer-house. Alma makes the house ready for leaving. Before leaving, she takes a look at herself in the mirror reflection, and we see the picture of Elisabet, as she was seen in the reflection during the night of merging, pass by, and the picture of the two women, but now with Elisabet outside the frame. Alma looks at the memory with fondness. She then looks at herself in the full daylight of present reality, strokes her hair, as if to affirm her identity, puts on her hat, and again lets her hands feel her face, gives it a look of calm, appreciating acceptance, and walks away. We see her, from behind a wooden sculpture of a woman with a suffering face, leave the house, and then there is a cut to Elisabet as Electra. We are reminded of the fact that we are looking at a film, by a cut to the machinery, then hear the bus coming, and see Alma boarding it.

Alma has left her desire to merge behind, after many fights, and much pain, and achieved her individuation, her feeling of separate and distinct, if brittle identity. The memory of the woman who helped her achieve this has passed by, like a shadow, and is acknowledged, with something of a smile.

### **The Actress Who Decided to Change Roles With Her Audience**

The initial silence of Elisabet, during the play, was due to the fact that she suddenly became aware of the fact that the death wishes against her mother she expressed on the stage were also her own, according to my interpretation. Once started, her silence seems to take on a life of its own, with different motivations during different periods in the film. A common characteristic is, however, that the silence becomes a sign of the superior rights of Elisabet: Alma implores her to speak, and Elisabet denies her that satisfaction, which means that the need becomes intensified all the time. As her silent role unfolds Elisabet discovers various possibilities in it. She observes how her silence makes Alma speak, how she gets to know a great many things about her, how intimacy grows, how things get pleasant. Later she experiences how her silence wakes up intense aggression, and how the disclosure about herself which the psychiatrist believed her to want is forced upon her.

A central conflict in the life of Elisabet is staged in the second part of the film. Elisabet is restless during the night. She takes out the photo of the boy from the Warsaw ghetto, and looks at it carefully, and for a long time. It seems clear that she compares the plight of this boy to that of her own boy, and reflects on possible similarities between them, such as feeling unprotected and rejected.

Her husband arrives in the night — was she restless because he was to come? — and mistakes Alma for Elisabet, but Elisabet assists in the mistake, and witness-

The mirror scene.





es the meeting between her husband and Alma, including the sexual intercourse. The face of Elisabet is shown in the foreground on several occasions, with the couple in the background, making it possible to interpret the scene as a memory of Elisabet. But perhaps not of her husband in a similar situation with another woman, but rather of herself, Elisabet, in a similar situation with an elderly man. There is no hint as to the precise nature of such a memory. But it seems reasonable to assume that the situation gave rise to feelings of helplessness, humiliation, betrayal, terror. Which could help explain Elisabet's failure as wife (it is not mature to regard your marriage as a union of tortured, helpless, lonely children), and as a mother.

The accusations of Alma, affirmed by the body language of Elisabet, in fact bring Elisabet the disclosure she longed for, according to the psychiatrist. In what follows her desire for the death of her child is mirrored by the younger woman, who secured an abortion, and the outbreak of violent emotions that follows does bring Elisabet back, she can feel that she is like other women, and the feeling is confirmed by her sucking blood from the younger woman. I know that many people regard this as a symbol of a problem of the artist. He or she cannot help observing what happens also in the most personal and intimate moments of life, and can not abstain from staging things in his/her life, just in order to get material for his/her work. But if it did not pertain to other people it would hardly be of such interest to the common audience.

In the film, Elisabet becomes painfully aware of what may be called her Electra complex, and memories of being sexually abused. Much in her has been repressed, including her desire to become a mother, and her love for her son, and her ability to establish a mature relationship with a man. She feels outside, with no chance of being accepted by ordinary, decent people. During the film she discovers that ordinary, decent people (nurse Alma is certainly as ordinary and decent as anyone could demand, given the information we get at first) may well harbour exactly the same feelings as she has condemned in herself, and can thus feel integrated in the human circle. The sucking of blood is the confirmation of this fact.

At the very end of the film we see Elisabet playing Electra again. She has thus left the role of the audience she has played during the film, and returned to being the active actress. It is a very short take, a flicker only, but it does show Elisabet during the agonized, reflective phase, not when she is on the verge of breaking into laughter. Two interpretations are possible: she is more secure in herself and can, due to this fact, harbour deeper feelings, or she is back in her old life, and at her old level of functioning, with perhaps a couple of new tones of voice and gestures in

her repertoire. The latter interpretation may seem rather nihilistic: audiences never learn anything, and art is thus of no avail. You may get this feeling when reading some of the critical evaluations of *Persona*. And what did I myself get out of *Persona* after seeing the film once? I was shaken, but had no idea how, or by what. I did not comprehend much. Did it have unconscious effects? I do not know.

### The Silence

*Persona* might well, slightly irreverently, be called *Silence II*, with Elisabet taking on the role of Ester, the boy the role of Johan, the son of Ester, Alma continuing the role of Anna, and the boys at the beach taking on the role of the waiter making love with Anna. The differences make clear the progress made. The silence in *Persona* is no longer something undefined, metaphorical, but on the contrary something not only tangible, but in fact something that is the consequence of a conscious decision. To fight against this silence will mean to lose, as in a deeper sense the silence always remains, but also to gain, as in the process you learn a lot, and discover your identity.

### The Boy. Autobiographical Aspects

The film ends with the boy, his hands searching the face of the women, and the film breaks down again.

The boy does not only look like the description of the son of Elisabet, he also looks rather much like Ingmar Bergman. In his book about his films and himself, *Bilder* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1990), Ingmar Bergman tells that he thinks that he was born out of what he calls a "cold womb," that he was not wanted, that he was very weak at birth and that his mother probably wanted him to be dead. In the last chapter of his autobiography *Laterna Magica* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1987) he attempts to understand his mother. She told him once that she never was accepted by her mother, the grandmother of Bergman. She loved her son, who later died. The grandmother had married an elderly man, who already had three sons, as a young woman. She had a daughter and a son herself, and when she was still young her husband died, leaving her with five children. Bergman asks: "What did she have to suppress and destroy?" "In my futile acumen I thought that I got a glimpse of the cool strength of my grandmother behind the drama of my parents." In *Bilder* Bergman says in the chapter on *Persona*: "I have said before that *Persona* saved my life. This is no overstatement... It was important that I for the first time did not care if the result would be to the taste of the public, or not. The gospel text of intelligibility that had been hammered into me... was at last sent to hell. (Where it belongs!)." He also writes: "Mrs Vogler craves for truth. She has searched for it everywhere, and sometimes she believes that she has found



something tenable, enduring, but suddenly the ground has cracked... I am unable to grasp the great catastrophes... They change my art into tricks, into something indifferent, all this nonsense, all this conceited self-confidence..." "So I felt that every tone in my voice, every word in my mouth was a lie, a play with emptiness and ennui. There was only one salvation from desperation and breakdown. To keep silent. To reach insight, or at least to try to collect the forces that still were there behind the silence". One can thus see close autobiographical parallels: the boy at the start and the end of *Persona*, who shared the early experiences of the director of the film, the importance of the old woman, grandmother in both cases? The boy/director who tries to understand the world of women, not least the world of the women who want abortions and who hate their children, the artist who stops pleasing the audience and who wants to become silent in order to find insight.

It is thus possible to make sense of the pointing out at the start and at the end of the film that it is just a film. The reality was just too horrible to digest as a reality. But when made into a thing to play with, which could be manipulated, it was possible to assimilate. The road to full acceptance of reality had, as in many cases, to make a detour into fantasy.

### And the Gains

The foremost gain for the director was thus that the film saved his life. Another possible gain is that Bergman in this film took an important step towards the recognition that fundamentally we are all alone, we can never really know anyone else. And by discovering this, the interest in other people, the desire to listen to them, the desire to get to know as much as is possible is magnified. Thus his films after this may contain somewhat less of personifications of different aspects of himself, and more of observations of other people. Many have noticed that the stylistic development of Bergman is from an illusionism of a rather conventional type over breaks in this style, peaking in *Persona*, and then a return to an illusionistic style. My point is that the early illusionistic style may be very different not only in its motivation but also in its expression. This possibility has not been studied systematically, but some observations may give support. For instance: in *A Passion* Elis Vergerus says roughly (my translation): "I do not try to believe that I can reach into the human soul with these photographic pictures, do not believe that, for God's sake. I can only register the play and counterplay of thousands of big and small forces. Then you can look at the picture, and create fantasies (...) All of it is a kind of nonsense, playthings, poems. You are not able to interpret another human being with any kind of claim to certainty that your reading is correct. Not even the most intensive physical pain always

manifests itself so that it can be observed." In her analysis of *From the Life of the Marionettes* Koskinen notes that the audience does not get to know anything certain about the inner life of Peter (Koskinen, p. 225). She also quotes the well known film critic and Bergman specialist Stig Björkman, who says "They give their view on him in more or less comprehensive tales. We get to know how they view him, but not who he is." A possible interpretation is that Bergman does not believe that it is possible to get to know who somebody is. Bergman himself says in *Pictures*: "I present different models of explanation, none of which is, and that is the intention, tenable." Another possibility to find possible changes in the films of Bergman after *Persona* would be to study the dialogues. My impression is that most of the characters speak Bergmanese in the films up to around *Persona*. This is logical, as they often can be seen as emanations from different parts of their creator. After *Persona*, if Bergman had accepted his loneliness, and the individuality of each of us, it would be conceivable that his ability to listen to the way people speak would increase, and the different characters would speak in ways characteristic of themselves. I think this possibility would be worth studying systematically. I will only point out that the big speech given at the end of his last film *Fanny and Alexander* by Gustav Adolf Ekdahl (played by Jarl Kulle) in honour of the small, intimate life, contains only a few lapses into Bergmanese. The gain of the audience, except these later films, is that marvelous picture poem, called *Persona*, on the emotions between mother and daughter, emotions that are ugly, mean, violent, murderous, tender, loving, emotions that are difficult to face without the help of great art.

### Formal Aspects of the Film

*Persona* starts with a rather long prologue, then follow the credits, the film proper, and a short epilogue.

At the start of the prologue no protagonist is suggested or implied. The film states that it is a film, by showing the technical devices by which it is working. The start of the prologue is showing that the reality shown by the film can disappear and change into unexpected and threatening directions. It undermines the psychological defences of the audience by starting with pictures showing that the defence in the form of cleaning the hands has already been carried out. It wakes the childish, and less solidly defended, parts of the audience by partly using the style of comics. And then it punches on with pictures related to primitive feelings of fright, sensual longings, punishments. These pictures are of general nature, and everyone in the audience is forced to associate to personal experiences of similar type, as there is nothing else to relate to. These associations can, owing to the tempo of the film, hardly become quite conscious, but they can be



expected to have general emotional effects, and to set psychological defences in function.

When the episode that gave rise to the story of the film is told, that is when Elisabet is acting Electra, and suddenly becomes silent, the audience had already had the same experience. That is, the experience that the 'Persona' (mask, role, character) in an action really conformed in an uncanny way to what is deeply true, and previously not realised in a reflected way, about herself. Elisabet reacted by becoming silent. We as an audience may react in a similar way, by not being able to communicate with the film. Thus our feelings of lack of contact with the film, and uneasiness.

The film proper starts as a clear, realistic description of a well-defined and orderly reality. Violence can be seen, on the TV, but is far away. The audience can calm down. We are going to be told an interesting story, not coming too uncomfortably close to disordered parts of ourselves. We see a young Alma, and her desire to develop, and having Elisabet as an ideal. The audience becomes gradually, and without noticing it too much, identified with Alma, because we get to know her thoughts: she is the one who speaks. Gradually, however, reality loses its certainty. We are not quite certain if Elisabet really spoke, or if it was the desires of Alma that made her hear her speak. We may discover that what we thought was reality itself in fact was reality behind the screen of a thin curtain, and also the fact that the total experience of reality may break down completely, as when the film breaks, and the audience shares the experience of Alma. The audience is reminded of the experiences from the prologue, and thus able to understand from personal reactions.

The film describes what may happen when there is a stability, staying power, strength and trust. Things that come up and disturb the sense of reality are allowed to come. The threats to the feeling of a coherent reality are taken, even to the point of losing a coherent language that can describe that reality. There is the trust that this can be done, and the trust that the power of growth and integration will heal what was initially seen as just a fragmentation, and heal it to real unity.

In the epilogue we see Elisabet and Alma part, with new knowledge and more integrated pictures of themselves. Elisabet returns to acting, from a better base. It is not possible to interpret the last picture of Elisabet, acting again, in any other way. That must also be the idea of the director. In the published manuscript the psychiatrist sums up what happened: Elisabet returned to her work. Bergman probably found that it was unnecessary to include this in the film, evident as it must be to the audience who had understood it.

The epilogue again points out that what we have seen was a film, by showing a picture of the team

shooting a picture. This reminds the audience of the prologue. This could be calming — it was just a film — but is not, as it reminds you of the possibility that reality may be just as undependable as the film has shown the reality of Alma to be, and that even your reality could break down: there is a lot of work to do if you want a trustworthy relation to reality.

In the final pictures of the film the boy is there. He has seen it all, and now understands much more of what happened to him, and can understand that much of it was not dependent on him, but of completely different conditions.

The film proper also contains some hints that it is a film. Elisabet takes a photo of the audience, or rather some of the film team, with a friendly and amused smile. This little action gives much of the general atmosphere of the film. It is devoted, serious, it is about life and death, but there is room for a playful and happy atmosphere, that makes the hard and dangerous work possible to carry out.

## Conclusion

The thesis in my article is that Bergman in *Persona* confronts a basic, great and intense conflict in himself, between a belief that he has to merge with others or with something greater in order to remain in existence, and the necessity to develop a separate identity. He does so with depth and energy, and is taking great risks, not least the risk of losing a coherent and understandable view of the world and of himself. The confrontation is however successful, and ends with affirming the possibility of separate, if brittle identities. This development should make the films before and after *Persona* different in a number of ways.

- 1) The treatment of silence should change.
- 2) The protagonists in the films before *Persona* should be emanations of tendencies in Bergman, those in films after *Persona* should be the results of studies of people around him.
- 3) The types of formulation of many protagonists in the films before *Persona* are very similar to each other when more serious themes are brought up. In the films after *Persona* the language, the formulations, are expected to be characteristic of every specific role.
- 4) Remaining differences and lack of understanding between the protagonists should after *Persona* be regarded as inherent in the human condition, inevitable, and be accepted.
- 5) The focus of interest before *Persona* is mainly in inner conflicts and their symbolic manifestations, after *Persona* in the relations between the protagonists and between the protagonists and the environment.



# Confession as betrayal:



by Deborah Thomas

Hitchcock's  
*I Confess* as  
Enigmatic Text



Despite its considerable complexities, *I Confess* has often been referred to in ways which don't fully take these into account. Thus, William Rothman sees the film as a commentary upon "the dark moment in the history of Hollywood at which it was made: its story about the courage and despair of a man scorned for his refusal to testify under interrogation is a thinly veiled allegory of McCarthyism and the blacklist" (*The Murderous Gaze*, Harvard University Press, 1982, page 248). Rothman, further, sees the refusal of Father Michael Logan (Montgomery Clift) to reveal the secrets of the confessional as an aspect of his "calling as a priest" (page 166). As David Sterritt puts it, "... Logan's predicaments in *I Confess* stem from his role in the church's centuries-old production..." (*The Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, page 72), a form of theatre, as it were. Generally, this withholding is seen as laudable, if somewhat uninteresting, despite more ambiguous tendencies on Logan's part towards martyrdom or overweening pride. One of the things which seems to have been overlooked, however,

ious hesitations — suggest a barrier has come down between them and some sort of fulfilment achieved. But the striking aspect of his present-day testimony at his trial is the care with which he chooses his words. Thus, his response — "I can't say" — to the prosecutor's question as to who put the bloodied cassock in his trunk, while literally true, is clearly intended to deceive, its words meant to be taken to imply lack of knowledge ("I don't know"), rather than deliberate withholding of the truth ("I refuse to say"). The fact that his testimony is not "obviously sincere" in this respect suggests that we should pay close attention to his words with respect to his relationship to Ruth as well. When asked whether he and Ruth were "such good friends that you spent the night with her," Logan simply comments, "We were caught in a storm," though the flashback implies they had already missed the last ferry back when the storm broke (Ruth's words in confessional voice-over — "I didn't know what time it was, but it was late. We'd missed the last ferry back from the island" — are given their visual equivalent through her



is the extent to which the film text of *I Confess* itself withholds knowledge from the viewer in various ways.

Clearly, crucial factual information is withheld: most surprisingly, we never learn with any certainty whether Logan and Ruth (Anne Baxter) commit adultery in the summer house. Robin Wood argues that, whereas the flashback visually suggests that they do, Logan's "obviously sincere testimony" (*Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, Faber and Faber, 1991, page 84) makes clear that they don't, the resultant lying flashback understandable as a wish-fulfilment on Ruth's part. It seems to me that neither flashback nor testimony is unequivocal in this way. I am more persuaded in the case of the flashback, where Michael's loving look at Ruth as she awakens — in contrast to his earlier anx-

shaking her stopped watch, broken by the rain, only minutes after the outbreak of the storm). "Oh, the storm was the villain," replies the prosecutor tellingly. Logan's response — "I saw nothing wrong with being caught in a storm" — while reasonable enough, both evades the issue of his responsibility and leaves a great deal unsaid. As with Logan's omission in reply to the question as to the discrepancy between the account of Keller (O.E. Hasse) and his own ("It could have been eleven forty-five. The rest isn't true"), a statement of fact ("We were caught in a storm," "It could have been eleven forty-five") acts as decoy for what is withheld. It is surely significant, however, that, whereas Logan explicitly denies Keller's account ("The rest isn't true"), while withholding an alternative version, he does not



deny the adultery with Ruth, which is perfectly by compatible, after all, with being caught in a storm. In any case, a metaphorical reading of storms as correlatives of emotional upheaval is readily available to viewers of such Hitchcock films as *Rebecca*, *Psycho*, and *Marnie*, the association of stormy weather and momentous events a commonplace of melodramatic rhetoric generally. On this reading, being "caught in a storm" becomes a thinly disguised admission of Logan's surrender to sexual desire. In its simultaneous assertion of fact and denial of guilt, Logan's statement is one of several exculpating confessions which punctuate the film. Compare Keller's somewhat overdetermined confession to his wife (Dolly Haas): "... I didn't mean to kill him. Oh, Alma, I'm not a murderer, it was an accident, it was the money. How could I watch you work so hard?", the excuses spilling out in indecent profusion. In contrast, the innocence of Logan's inadvertent adultery seems supported by the film, reinforced by the fact

that he was unaware of Ruth's marriage at the time, and had not yet become a priest. Indeed, it is interesting to speculate on whether his motive in becoming a priest stems from the revelation of Ruth's betrayal of him in having married another man, the revelation occurring at precisely the moment when his sexual anxieties appear to have been overcome.

The obscurity of Logan's motive in becoming a priest and Ruth's marrying Pierre Grandfort (Roger Dann) is another instance of the film's wilful opacity. However, a tentative coherence can be given to both events in the developing context of Ruth and Michael's relationship. Michael's ambivalence to Ruth is apparent at a very early stage: he enlists in the army, declines to get engaged to Ruth, and advises her not to wait for him, the combined effect of such behaviour a clear case of protesting too much, the implied anxieties surrounding a fully sexual relationship with Ruth denied through an embracing of the 'manly' pursuit of war. As Larrue (Karl Malden) remarks, "I believe you were awarded the military cross... you seem to have done a number of brave things," and Logan's final pointless confrontation of an armed and hostile Keller — his intervention leading to Keller's death since the police are obliged to shoot him when he threatens Logan — takes such courage to the point of absurdity. It follows on from Keller's taunting of Logan, whom he mistakenly assumes to have betrayed him ("You are a coward, like all other people, aren't you? A hypocrite, like all the rest..."), implying that Logan has a deep-seated need — to the point of self-destructiveness — to prove his manhood through courageous acts. At the same time, he withholds his sexuality (rechanneling it into such acts of excessive bravery) by refusing to get engaged or have Ruth wait for him — and ultimately by becoming a priest. Logan's anxieties about his relationship with Ruth are further underlined both by Ruth's remark to Logan on the ferry ("Are you afraid of me? Why?") and by Larrue when he asks Logan why he doesn't want Ruth to reveal the basis of Villette's (Ovila Legare's) blackmailing of her ("What are you afraid of?"). Although the implied love-making in the summer house provides a contrast to Logan's tight control over both his words and sexuality elsewhere, producing the film's only image of him as fully relaxed and free of anxiety, it is a short-lived release, Villette's appearance and addressing of Ruth as 'Madame Grandfort' making her use and betrayal of Logan suddenly overt.

So the course of Logan's relationship with Ruth may be seen as a series of betrayals and retaliations. In response to Logan's inability right from the start to give himself fully to Ruth, as evidenced by his eager embracing of the war and her hostile response ("He was one of the first to volunteer. I hated him for that"), we have Ruth's marriage to Grandfort, an action inad-



Flashback: Caught in the storm.



quately explained by the mere fact that Michael has stopped writing to her (yet another instance of his withholding). If Ruth's marriage is a retaliation for Michael's insufficient love ("He didn't know he could never love me enough"), then his becoming a priest is an answering retaliation on his part for the revelation at the summer house of Ruth's marriage to Pierre. Ruth's confession to Larrue of her past involvement with Logan — which, though ostensibly intended to provide him with an alibi, only implicates him further by providing a motive for the murder ("I was going to help Michael; I've destroyed him") — can be seen as a further response on Ruth's part to Logan's refusal to reciprocate her love, both in general terms (by becoming a priest) and specifically (on the ferry). So Logan's initial flight into war sets off a chain of events which culminate in Ruth's confession. Thus:

**Logan goes to war — Ruth marries Pierre — Logan finds out Ruth is married — Logan becomes a priest — Ruth confesses**

From the decisive moment of Ruth's wedding onward, Villette is closely linked to each of these moments of betrayal.

That the film text of *I Confess* is deliberately enigmatic, raising numerous questions of interpretation of facts and motivation while withholding evidence which would make a preferred reading salient, is nowhere more apparent than in the treatment of Villette. That aspects of the film seem intentionally opaque, accessible only to readings which go beyond 'naturalistic' ones, is confirmed by Hitchcock's response to Truffaut's remark to him about a central implausibility in the plot: "... Isn't it a rather formidable coincidence that the murderer who has killed him in order to rob him should happen to confess his crime to the very priest who was being blackmailed by the dead man?" "Yes, I suppose so" (Francois Truffaut's *Hitchcock*, Panther Edition, 1969, page 249). Hitchcock's reluctant acquiescence hints at the irrelevance of such a coincidence, intimating that a different sort of logic is at work, a more symbolic mapping. As suggested above, the most obviously symbolic character in the film is Villette, who first comes to Ruth's notice as an uninvited guest at her wedding whom neither she nor her husband knows (a fact made clear by their puzzled exchange of looks). Larrue, in the course of interviewing Logan after Villette's murder, enlarges the extent of Villette's function as an unknown quantity: "No one seems to have known this Villette. And yet he was a lawyer, he had clients. Not one of his clients had any information to give about the man..." As if to underline Villette's function as symbolic marker in Hitchcock's fiction, Hitchcock makes his cameo appearance in the background of one

of the film's first few shots as he walks away from the direction of the murder scene only minutes before Keller leaves the scene in the opposite direction. Hitchcock, as director, as much as Keller, as character, has killed off Villette for reasons not accessible to a reading which takes Keller's confession as the film's only account, though in terms of the narrative it is obviously meant to be taken as true enough. The film's title (*I Confess*), with its direct address to the viewers, is, perhaps, further evidence that Hitchcock is asserting his own complicity in the crime.

So what does the murder of Villette signify? Ruth's reaction to Villette's death — "I can't believe it — we're free" — as voiced to Logan the following morning raises the possibility that Keller in some sense performs Logan's act for him (after all, Logan had told Ruth not to worry, that he would deal with Villette, though we never find out how he intended to carry this out). So, on



Flashback: Logan's hesitancy.



this reading, what Logan desires, Keller enacts. Clearly Keller is himself unaware of Hitchcock's possible use of him in such a way, as he has no notion of being a character in another's fiction. It is true that he may resent Logan, despite disclaimers to the contrary ("You saw that my wife and I were not common servants. It was you who found more pleasant tasks for us..."); there is, after all, not much evidence to suggest that they are treated any better than servants, and his stated motive for robbing Villette is to liberate his overworked wife Alma from such drudgery, though the ease with which he kills her prevents this motive from being fully credible. The donning of a cassock to perform the robbery hints at an unconscious desire to implicate Logan which pushes towards increasingly conscious enactment (the confession to him, the planting of the bloody cassock in his trunk, his testimony at the trial). But Keller's implicating of Logan serves another purpose than his desire for revenge alone: it allows Ruth (as well as Larrue) reasonable grounds to believe in Logan's guilt. If Keller claims to have acted on Alma's behalf ("It was my wife working so hard"), an alternative scenario will allow Ruth to believe Logan has acted on hers. That is, if Logan is guilty of killing Villette, this can be taken as evidence of his love for Ruth after all. Clearly, in these terms, Ruth has a stake in believing him to be guilty. Although Larrue withholds the time of Villette's death from her until her confession is out, he does not give her a false time of death either, so she has no grounds to assume her having been with him until eleven establishes his innocence of the crime. It is only when Keller's words, on thinking himself to have been betrayed by Logan ("So the priest talked"), give away irrevocably his own guilt, that Ruth can be sure of Logan's innocence, upon which she immediately leaves with Pierre, freed from her illusion that Logan might finally have loved her enough.

So Ruth's confession serves a pair of ulterior purposes from her point of view in both supplying Larrue with a motive to implicate Logan in the crime (thus, constituting an act of revenge on Ruth's part) and publicly displaying that motive as proof of Logan's love for her through her testimony at his trial (providing a vindication of her own devotion). Indeed, Ruth has fairly consistently pushed for public displays of her relationship with Michael; that such behaviour jeopardises both her marriage and his career as a priest is hardly in conflict with her desires. Thus, she needlessly reveals herself to Villette when he discovers her and Michael together at the summer house ("I was still in the summer house. He didn't know who I was but, apparently, he knew I was a woman, because he made some remark to Michael. Michael knocked him down. I came out and stood on the steps of the summer house and looked down at him..."). Further, she endangers Logan by insisting they meet publicly on the ferry when he is

certain to be under observation, and her comment to Pierre about her being with Logan on the night of the murder ("I was with him at the time") — especially given the fact that Pierre knows of his wife's love for the priest — is worded and delivered so as to imply an illicit rendez-vous, rather than an innocent meeting with an old friend in order to get his advice, as she later explains it to Larrue. Thus, Keller, Ruth, and, of course, Pierre (who remarks of Logan, "I hope he's in trouble, terrible trouble") all have their own reasons for wanting Father Logan to be found guilty of the murder of Villette. One has only to observe the ambiguous reactions of each of them as they hear he's been cleared.

The version of Villette's murder which sees Keller as Logan's *alter ego* acting on Ruth's behalf in removing the man who threatens public exposure of Logan's relationship with Ruth is at odds, however, with Ruth's desire (whether conscious or not) to have their relationship go public. Another interpretation of the murder suggests itself whereby the killing of Villette can be taken as the enactment of Logan's desire not to suppress the relationship with Ruth for her sake, but to deny the relationship in opposition to Ruth's desire to have it publicly affirmed. On this reading, Villette becomes Ruth's agent in threatening to reveal their affair, and his murder becomes an indirect murder of Ruth (or, at any rate, the threat she represents), producing a partial resolution of the ambivalent feelings of desire and anxiety aroused by her in Logan. The links between Villette and Ruth are further suggested by the manner in which we discover his dead body, dressed in white and lying on his back on the floor of his house, which we see as the camera leads us in through an open window (presumably Keller's point of entry, but surprisingly left wide open throughout the attempted robbery, in the course of which Villette interrupts him and is killed). The parallels with the love-making scene in the summer house are startling — Ruth dressed in white and the gazebo itself an open and flimsy structure — in contrast to the locked doors of the buildings where Michael and Ruth first seek shelter, and here too they are interrupted by Villette. Surely it is not too fanciful to suggest that Villette's body in white sprawled on his back on the floor of his house — the one missing element in the summer house scene — has its implied counterpart in Ruth's body in white on the floor of the gazebo in the scene of love-making which Hitchcock withholds. Such a parallel reinforces not merely the way in which Villette and Ruth are linked but the way in which the symbolic murder of Ruth (displaced onto Villette) is a murder of her precisely in her aspect as an object of Logan's desire. That Logan's desire for Ruth is ambivalent and laced with anxieties about his 'manliness,' as I've argued, further suggests, however, that Villette signifies not just Ruth's threaten-



ing desirability but also the threat to Logan of his own 'feminine' side, Villette's demeanor and even his name — in contrast to Keller's more 'masculine' one, say — supporting a sense of him as feminised and thus as a possible projection of Logan's uncertain masculinity itself. In this context, it is worth remembering that Logan too, at one point in the film, is seen in white, when wearing his lacy priestly garb.

What we've seen in all this is the extent to which *I Confess* is a text whose events lend themselves to a range of varied interpretations. This is certainly not peculiar to this film alone, but what is more unusual is the unavoidable sense that such ambiguity is part of a deliberate strategy. Further, the viewers' difficulties in extracting and deciphering motives and facts when so much is withheld have their narrative parallels in Larrue's attempts to solve the crime (the fact that the trial judge disagrees with the jury's verdict is further evidence of the difficulties of this endeavour). As the Crown Prosecutor, Robertson (Brian Aherne) remarks to Larrue, "And now here you have a case in which there are no clues, no fingerprints, no motives, no suspects." How to make sense of the murder — and from the viewer's standpoint, the movie as a whole — becomes the subject of an instructional scene between Logan and Larrue, which merits quoting at some length:

**Larrue: But you do understand, don't you, that I must consider every scrap of information?**

**Logan: Yes.**

**Larrue: When a murder has been committed, each scrap of information is important to the police... You see, with a murder, one has to jump from one detail to another. Forgive me, perhaps I jumped too suddenly for you.**

**Logan: Well, it seems maybe I don't follow as fast as you jump. I have a methodical mind — I do have to take things one by one.**

**Larrue: So do I. So do I. The difficulty, perhaps, is that, un, well, we aren't thinking from the same point of view. Could it be that, Father?**

**Logan: It could be. I don't really know what your point of view is.**

**Larrue: Oh? Then I put it badly, very badly. Let me try again.**

Logan's response to Larrue's deductions is to warn him against too ready a trust in surface appearances: "Well, then, I would say that a man of intelligence would not be led to believe anything on so little evidence" (a comment echoed, parenthetically, by Father Millais (Charles André): "... of course, one should not judge on so little evidence," when discussing advertisements for paints with not smell). But the characters do believe things on too little evidence. Thus, when Larrue questions the schoolgirl about the man she saw leaving

Villette's house on the night of his murder — "But you are absolutely sure he was a priest?" — she affirms this with confidence, based only on the fact that he was dressed in a cassock. (Perhaps we are being enjoined to question Logan himself being a 'real priest' free of secular desires just because he wears a cassock — the otherwise enigmatic point-of-view shot of a suit of men's clothes which Logan sees in a shop before he turns himself in to Larrue supports this view.) When the two schoolgirls are first brought in to Larrue for questioning, the obvious disappointment of the Crown Prosecutor provides another clear example of an obviously unwarranted expectation on his part that they would be attractive young women, rather than, literally, girls. Further, when asked about Logan's whereabouts on the night of the murder, one of the priests tells the investigating policeman, "but I'm perfectly sure it was all right," though Logan was, in fact, out driving with Ruth. the final and oddest example — and an instance I can make sense of in no other way — is when Father Benoit (Gilles Pelletier) asks Alma to have her husband check the flat tire on his bicycle, and Keller later remarks, "But the tire wasn't flat after all, Alma." The film is clearly signalling to its viewers both that we must look beyond misleading appearances and that the meanings we take away from the film will be relative to the points of view we choose to adopt.

The arbitrariness of this last example is pushed even further in the falling over of Father Benoit's bicycle in the rectory corridor. The frequency with which such random events may occur in our lives off-screen does little to vitiate the oddity of an event so unmotivated and unanchored in the narrative world, such are our expectations that a film's events don't merely happen, they signify. Its purpose in defying our best attempts to place it within a coherent interpretation of the film's events can only be to remind us of Hitchcock's irreducible presence within the text. Larrue shifts from hostility towards Logan to sympathy and identification as he abandons his belief in Logan's guilt and readjusts his 'reading' of events and motives. This parallels our own shifts as viewers as we try out and discard a range of interpretations, finally settling on the one that most coherently maps onto the narrative world. Yet Hitchcock is at pains to insist on his final right to withhold any basis for a definitive reading (both of the falling of the bicycle and more generally) in order to assert his vocation as author of the text. A moment which has not clear meaning within the fiction may have meaning as fiction. That is, the very fact that it's Hitchcock's fiction is its meaning. We're back to Hitchcock's cameo appearance in the film where we saw that Hitchcock, as much as Keller, kills Villette. That they both have wives named Alma underlines the point.



# Lola Montes





## by **Mickey Burns**

*Lola Montes, adapted from a popular novel, was planned as a super-production, to be made in French, German, and English versions, with an international cast, in Cinema Scope and Eastman Colour. The film cost over 650 million francs, and was one of the biggest commercial flops of all time.*<sup>1</sup>

As Richard Roud goes on to explain in *Max Ophuls, An Index*, the reasons are not difficult to find. Audiences were expecting, for the price of a film ticket within the safety of a theatre seat, to experience and be titillated by the exploits of the courtesan Lola Montes. Instead, they were subjected to a meditation (and not a flattering one) on the fears and resulting egos that were drawn to such forms of objectified entertainment. Yet despite its box office failure, French critics hailed Ophuls' last film as perhaps his greatest.

*Lola Montes* has been interpreted by many, including Max Ophuls himself, as an exploration of the phenomenon of celebrity: Specifically the destruction of individuals who find themselves trapped within their own celebrity. In *Max Ophuls and the Cinema of Desire*, Alan Larson Williams quotes Ophuls (from an interview in *Arts* in April of 1956) on how he found the inspiration to make *Lola Montes*:

When it was proposed that I do 'Lola' it seemed to me that the subject was completely foreign to me. I don't like lives in which a great many things happen. At the same time, I was struck by a series of news items which, directly or indirectly, took me back to 'Lola': Judy Garland's nervous breakdown, the sentimental adventures of Zsa Zsa Gabor. I meditated on the tragic brevity of careers today. The questions asked by the audience in 'Lola' were inspired by certain radio programs.<sup>2</sup>

Williams also quotes film maker Marcel Ophuls (from an interview from the Rice University Media Centre in 1973) on why he thought his father's film was initially received so poorly by the industry as well as the public:

... I think what was not understood was that the film is a denunciation of exhibitionism in show business *through show business* and a denunciation of spectacle *within* the spectacle. It was a way for my father to react against having to make a film in Cinema Scope, in color, with Martine Carol [as Lola], and a lot of other things, when actually his original plan had been to make a very small film

with a romance between an old king and his young mistress; which would have been a much more romantic and intimate film. And once he accepted all the spectacle, with a bigger budget and so forth, he quite subconsciously, I think, felt more and more like denouncing it. In that way he really was making a film against the producers, and I think they knew that all along. And that provoked a feverish, crisis atmosphere which is very much felt in the film.<sup>3</sup>

Marcel Ophuls' interpretation of the making of the film and its subsequent 'disaster' offers some very helpful insight as to why the producers found the film so offensive. But it is through the eyes of the average 1955 movie-going audience that one begins to understand why it was so difficult for the public to embrace such a film.

Max Ophuls worked in Hollywood throughout the forties, before making *Lola Montes*, and was no stranger to the 'climate' in which women in Hollywood were working. Susan Faludi, in her book *Backlash, The Undeclared War Against American Women*, has a very interesting perspective on "the silencing" of women in film, and goes on to make specific reference to the 30's, 40's and 50's:

The words of one outspoken independent woman, Mae West, provoked the reactionary Production Code of Ethics in 1934... which banned premarital sex and enforced marriage (but allowed rape scenes) on screen until the late 50's... [she wound] up as carpeting along with the other overly independent female stars of the era: Marlene Dietrich, Katharine Hepburn, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford and West were all officially declared 'box office poison' in a list published by the president of Independent Theater Owners of America... [then the] studios brought in the quiet good girls. The biggest Depression female star, Shirley Temple... got the highest ratings from adult men... By the '50's, the image of womanhood surrendered had won out, its emblem the knock-kneed and whispery-voiced Marilyn Monroe... Strong women were displaced by good girls like Debbie Reynolds and Sandra Dee. Women were finally silenced in 50's cinema by their absence from most of the era's biggest movies, from *High Noon* to *Shane* to *The Killing* to *Twelve Angry Men*... While women were relegated to mindless how-to-catch-a-husband movies, men escaped to womanless landscapes. Against the back-

<sup>1</sup> Richard Roud, *Max Ophuls, An Index* (London: British Film Institute, 1958), pp. 39-41.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Larson Williams, *Max Ophuls and the Cinema of Desire* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), pp. 138-140.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



escaped to womanless landscapes. Against the backdrop of war trenches and the American West, they triumphed at last — if not over their wives then at least over the Indians and Nazis.<sup>4</sup>

As Opuls himself said “... I was struck by a series of [Hollywood] news items which, directly or indirectly, took me back to Lola: Judy Garland’s nervous breakdown, the sentimental adventures of Zsa Zsa Gabor.”<sup>5</sup>

Having said all of the above in an attempt to shed some light on the environment in which *Lola Montes* was made and received, it is of great use to now discuss John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*. In his discussion, Berger is basically saying that how a woman looks determines how she will be treated. And on a superficial level, one could suggest that women have honed the skill of manipulation through the internalization of their objectification, and to some extent this is true. In order to survive in a patriarchal society, women, girls, and to some extent gay men, have internalized their objectification. However, when it is suggested that perhaps manipulation of men by women is the very thing that led to the objectification of women by men, I offer the film *Lola Montes* to provide some insight. As Berger’s article explains:

A man’s presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies ... A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you ... By contrast, a woman’s presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her ... One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at ... A woman’s own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.<sup>6</sup>

Dare I say, the same holds true for a woman’s sexuality? Women have been objectified for so long, that we are now aware (subconsciously and a heartening many consciously) of our status as objects and behave accordingly (and often as not, try very hard not to). If a man has the ability to feel sexual when he experiences that which titillates him, then a woman has been socialized to feel sexual when she perceives herself to be seen as so.

Keeping in mind the climate of the 50’s and the manifestations of the objectification of women, it’s interesting to note that *Lola Montes* is most popularly referred to as a meditation on stars and their celebrity status, and the paying audience’s fascination with that myth. In other words, the notion that Lola’s act sells danger and excitement in a highly-controlled way that renders her not dangerous (to the audience) at all. But it goes so much deeper than that. *Lola Montes* was a film about a woman who acted independently, resisted

being objectified, chose her lovers rather than wait to be chosen, claimed her sexuality as her own, and most importantly, behaved nothing like Sandra Dee. Throughout her adventures, the men in Lola’s life tried time and again to contain and control her. After all, according to Berger, the greater a woman’s perceived sexuality and independence, the greater the promise of excitement. But also, the greater the threat to men’s sense of control and domination. Lola had the rare distinction of promising much sexual excitement. However, in the eyes of men, that rendered her a threatening object that must be controlled. The more Lola declared her independence and claimed her freedom, the greater the efforts to bring her under control. In the end, patriarchy succeeded. Lola, under the weight of a backlash literally the size of a Bavarian revolution, finally became exhausted in her resistance. In the end, Lola, faced with poverty, the ultimate patriarchal tool for keeping women oppressed, was forced to personify her own objectification in the form of a circus act. In fact, a rereading of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, which includes the story of Shakespeare’s imaginary sister, is in many ways an accurate parallel of what happened to Lola. Driven to physical illness and the ultimate in mental frustration in her attempts to assert her individuality within a patriarchal system that thwarted her at every turn, Lola, chose a slow form of suicide.

The sad part of this phenomenon is that the backlash treatment prevalent in *Lola Montes* still occurs today with women who proclaim their independence and particularly their sexual freedom. Madonna’s *Sex* book, as well as her film *Truth or Dare* were both anticipated with much titillation. However, when they were released (particularly the book) she was crucified by the press, which was then echoed by the public. Why? Because the film, and particularly the book, did not objectify her. She was the choreographer of the fantasies. She was a participant who offered her fantasies for others to share, rather than offer herself to be shared within other’s fantasies. As Madonna herself reveals:

My mistake was that I naively thought that everybody liked the same things I liked... I think men can deal with those fantasies when a man is in control of them and in charge, like your father and his magazine. It’s a man’s point of view, it’s a man’s fantasy. [The book] was my fantasy...<sup>7</sup>

It’s interesting to note that the film *Lola Montes* stylistically explores the notion of women as objects simply by presenting Lola in such a way that we are always observing her. Although some of the flashbacks function as Lola’s memory, only when Lola is making her potentially fatal leap at the end of the film does the camera represent her point of view.



Men want to see (the operative work here being 'see', not 'experience') her as beautiful, sexual, wild. She is therefore presented as that fantasy in a caged, controlled environment. And as is also true of pornography, the promise of excitement and titillation is huge, while the actual threat of having to experience a real woman in this way is non-existent.

On the other hand, however, the ring master, played by Peter Ustinov, has a huge social presence, because it is he that promises to deliver the spectacle of sexual excitement, an object exterior to himself. He enters the film brandishing a whip; immediate testimony to the promise of a wild woman who must be tamed. Lola is then introduced as "A creature a hundred times more wild than any beast in our menagerie. A monster of cruelty... with the eyes of an angel!" (Aha! So that's the fear — sexually free women are 'monsters of cruelty' disguised as angels!) Not far into this first sequence Lola "in a spirit of penitence" will donate money collected for "the relief of fallen women". Now if penitence means to feel regret for one's sins, then Lola's sins were her deviation from objectification and acting with self-directed autonomy. And what could be more explicitly symbolic than the images of Lola's head being carried about on sticks? Decapitating her makes perfect sense because the precise thing that was wrong with Lola was that she used her head to direct her body. In fact, when the audience asks Lola questions at the beginning of the film, the ring master does most of the answering, thus not permitting Lola to have a 'voice'. Lola is presented entirely, and only, 'to be viewed'. She's even presented on a turning pedestal, in order to facilitate a 360 degree view. At one point in the opening sequence the camera circles her 'checking her out', and making it perfectly clear that she is on display. As Berger discusses, however, being on display has nothing to do with the wishes of the individual being objectified. And therein lies her personal entrapment by her public persona. Berger sums it up like this, "To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of man. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under tutelage within such a limited space."<sup>8</sup>

One of the aspects of the film that is most gratifying is the many layers of symbolic entrapment that serve to visually underline Lola's position. Lola is in a land (America) that is foreign to her, and in a circus; often the last stop for 'freaks' and social outcasts. She is beneath a tent, surrounded by the audience, contained within the circus ring, often in a rig or in a cage, and even then on a pedestal. Lola's constantly shown caged and contained (or behind ropes and ladders when backstage) and literally behind bars at the

end of the film. In fact, in the opening sequence Lola is presented to the audience entirely inanimate and objectified. She is seated in such a way that it appears she has only a torso. Her lower body, representing her sexuality, is rendered invisible. She does not move, she does not answer questions. The camera, the ring master, and the members of the troop do all the moving around her. Lola's face doesn't even change expression. She's virtually a statue, perfectly emulating Berger's theoretical object.

Just as Berger suggests using our imagination to transform the classic nude into a man, Ophuls takes the nude, in this case Lola, and turns her into a real live woman. The film makes her breathe, and by forcing the film's audience to watch her being watched, it is possible to better understand the oppression of an objectified woman. To further illustrate this, imagine yourself a fly on the wall on the set of a pornography video shoot. The director/camera person is most assuredly a man, definitely making much more money than the woman being shot. And why is she there? Fleeing a worse predicament perhaps. But above all else, she is objectified, subjugated, literally stripped of individuality, and needing the money for sure.

As for Ophuls' *Lola Montes*, it's quite clear that the film supports Lola's attempt at independence and presents her entrapment within the circus in a very sad manner; a very progressive idea for the period in which the film is set, and sadly enough, still an idea ahead of its time in 1955, let alone 1996.

Just look at how Ophuls presents Lola in the beginning of the film. Our first glimpse of Lola's past has her reclining in a carriage looking somewhat 'masculine'. Wearing a shirt and vest with her hair slicked back and smoking, Lola is clearly set up to look like a man, symbolizing her quest for independence. In fact, in this sequence Lola tells her lover, Franz Liszt "Life for me is moving on." Spoken just like a stereotypical man. The ring master even talks about how Lola was the first woman in Europe to smoke cigars, another strictly male domain. In this first flashback, we often see Lola as if we're peeping in. First through the window of the carriage just before her lover draws the curtain shutting out our view, and second through the iron railing and veiling surrounding the bed, just before her lover leaves. The film hardly presents her as a woman on display for others. We are simply allowed to

<sup>4</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash, The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 114-115.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, pp. 138-140.

<sup>6</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, pp. 46 - 55.

<sup>7</sup> Guccione, Bob Jr. "Live to Tell" *Spin*, January 1996, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> Berger, pp. 46-55.



peak at her life as it is, respecting her choices and her privacy: a stark contrast to the full 360 degree view we have of her in the circus.

In a later reminiscence, Lola recollects her mother's attempt to marry her off. When preparing to meet the man her mother has arranged for her to marry, Lola tells her mother "He won't like me." Her mother answers "I sent him your portrait. He won't be disappointed." The man she is to marry is a banker, carrying the promise of wealth and prestige and power, while Lola is valued as an object of beauty, specifically for how closely she can resemble her portrait. As an expression of protest Lola rejects this marriage and exercises her own will to marry another younger, dashing, handsome man: her first autonomous move in a long career of choices that ultimately exhausts her leaving her no choice but to comply and conform. (It's interesting that Ophüls stages the 'energy' of the circus act in much the same way. Lola's act begins slowly and as it progresses it becomes more of a spectacle and more exhausting, until by the end there's nothing Lola can do to surpass the previous stunt except perform a death-defying jump.) Lola chooses to leave this drunken, abusive, adulterous husband who actually says to her as she's leaving "I'd rather kill you." Translation: He'd rather kill her than lose control over her. And this is when the film begins to provide direct insight to the backlash against Lola. Because at this precise moment, the film cuts back to the circus where the ring master ironically recants this brave, decisive event in Lola's life as "Lola could not be content with family life..."

In Tivoli, Lola has an affair with the music director, not knowing he's married. When Lola finds out, she confronts the director's wife during a performance and storms off. The ring master twists this into "another notorious scandal of her own making." Nothing makes patriarchy scream "Scandalous!" more than a woman who dares stand up for herself and name her abuse. As Lola herself said to the ring master when he makes his initial offer to book her as a circus act "... I am not a scandal machine. I simply do as I please."

The entire sequence where the King arranges to commission a painting of Lola gives commentary on how men have attempted to manipulate Lola throughout her life. What is sad however, is that not one male character (except perhaps the doctor) in the circus can see what we see: how sad the 'taming of Lola' really is and how poorly that reflects on the men who have come to see her.

Perhaps the most perfect link between the film *Lola Montes* and Berger's *Ways of Seeing* is when the King commissions a painting of Lola and chooses the painter who takes the longest in order to detain her. Not only is the painting an attempt to contain her, but the very cre-

ation of the painting is an attempt to contain her. The final painting of Lola is of her stretched out nude, her back to the viewer, and her head turned so that she is specifically looking at the viewer of the painting. It bears an uncanny resemblance to the painting 'La Grande Odalisque', featured in Berger's article. As Berger points out about the painting "It is the expression of a woman responding with calculated charm to the man whom she imagines looking at her... She is offering up her femininity as the surveyed."<sup>9</sup> In this painting commissioned by the King, Lola is forever harnessed. She is now available 24 hours a day for his pleasure alone, and not her own. In fact, never once in the film does the King concern himself with what Lola wants, only what he needs and desires. Of course this is complicated by the fact that Lola, although objectified by the King, truly cares for him, unlike the other men in her life. Which brings us right back to Berger. If one must be objectified, then let it be by the man with the most power and money and influence.

Finally, as the revolt in Bavaria begins, Lola is helped to escape by her young admirer, a student who tells her "This revolt is the work of reactionaries. You represent freedom, love, everything they detest." The student goes on to say "They want to imprison you, perhaps kill you." In the end 'they' got what they wanted. Lola is literally imprisoned in her own celebrity, in the circus by her need to make a living. She is in a cage-like stage in which she remains motionless while the male spectators file past, forever imprisoned by the limitations placed on her gender by patriarchy. As the young student tells Lola as they escape Bavaria, "One mustn't fight destiny." Or as Lola adds "Or mistake one's destiny."

If Berger implies that the ultimate woman for an insecure man is in the form of an object which internalizes its objectification, then it must be that much more titillating to have the object be alive and breathing, yet caged and controlled for your viewing only. For example, in Munich, after Lola's performance at the Royal theater two men discuss her. One is going on about her exploits and talks about how she's had "42 lovers" and those are only the ones he knows about. The second man responds by saying "My dear Director, you're exaggerating. Five minutes in her company and a man goes about boasting of it. He lets people (including himself) imagine he's her lover, though he never was. We're all the same aren't we?"

And that is precisely the point. A few minutes with Lola allows one to claim her as one's own and boost one's ego by bragging about one's sexuality. In the end 'they' got what they really wanted — the chance to own Lola for the price of a circus ticket.

In a recent edition of *Ms.* there was an article written by a heterosexual male called "Eroticizing Equality". He talks about watching female strippers:



Lola (Martine Carol) with the King of Bavaria (Anton Wallbrook)



Watching... is an exciting and erotic experience for me... But at the same time, it's a very uncomfortable one. I get a feeling when I watch her that I'm participating in a misuse of pleasure... like the turn-on I get is false. I get off easy, sitting back, paying for the show. No one ever expects me to get up on stage.<sup>10</sup>

Berger talks about the same thing when he discusses the painting the 'Allegory of Time and Love' by Bronzino, "Her body is arranged... to display it to the man looking... to appeal to his sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality. Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own."<sup>11</sup>

What makes the film a meditation on oppression rather than being guilty of it, is how beautifully Lola is symbolized stylistically. The film itself embodies and pays tribute to the richness and multi-faceted spirit of Lola Montes. Every reminiscence is filmed in a different colour; the very rich layering of visual-containment motifs; the spectacularly visual staging of the circus show with elaborate costumes, sets and props; the many different layers of story telling; the ring master's version, Lola's memories, flashbacks that aren't Lola's memories, the actual staged show.

Having said all of the above, it makes perfect sense that the film was so vehemently opposed by so many. Even Pauline Kael's review of *Lola Montes* practiced the oppressive sexism and internalized objectification that the film attempts to shed some light on. She refers to Lola as "far past her prime"; calls Martine Carol "a rather dumpy little woman" and makes reference to Ophüls' "script girl".<sup>12</sup>

Finally, as Lola is forced to escape Bavaria she herself admits "I've lived too much, had too many adventures. Bavaria was my last chance... it's all over... all over... something has broken inside me; it's over." As she told the ring master

when he first made the offer, "If you ever see me again, it will be for the worst." The persecution of her freedom and independence has finally broken her spirit, but as the circus manager says "She has to make a living." In the end, Lola took the only job she could — exploiting her exploits. The decline of her freedom led to the decline of her spirit which ultimately led to the decline of her health. And in the end, unable to cope with her lot, she attempts suicide by jumping without a net.

Here, as we finally see through Lola's eyes, death is her only way out. Without her freedom and her spirit dead, the only thing left to die is her body. But of course a successful suicide attempt would have meant that in the end she finally got to exercise her right to choose. And since this clearly is not what the film is about, Lola lives on, trapped in the persona forced upon her.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Jason Schultz "Eroticizing Equality" *Ms.*, November/December 1995, p. 58.

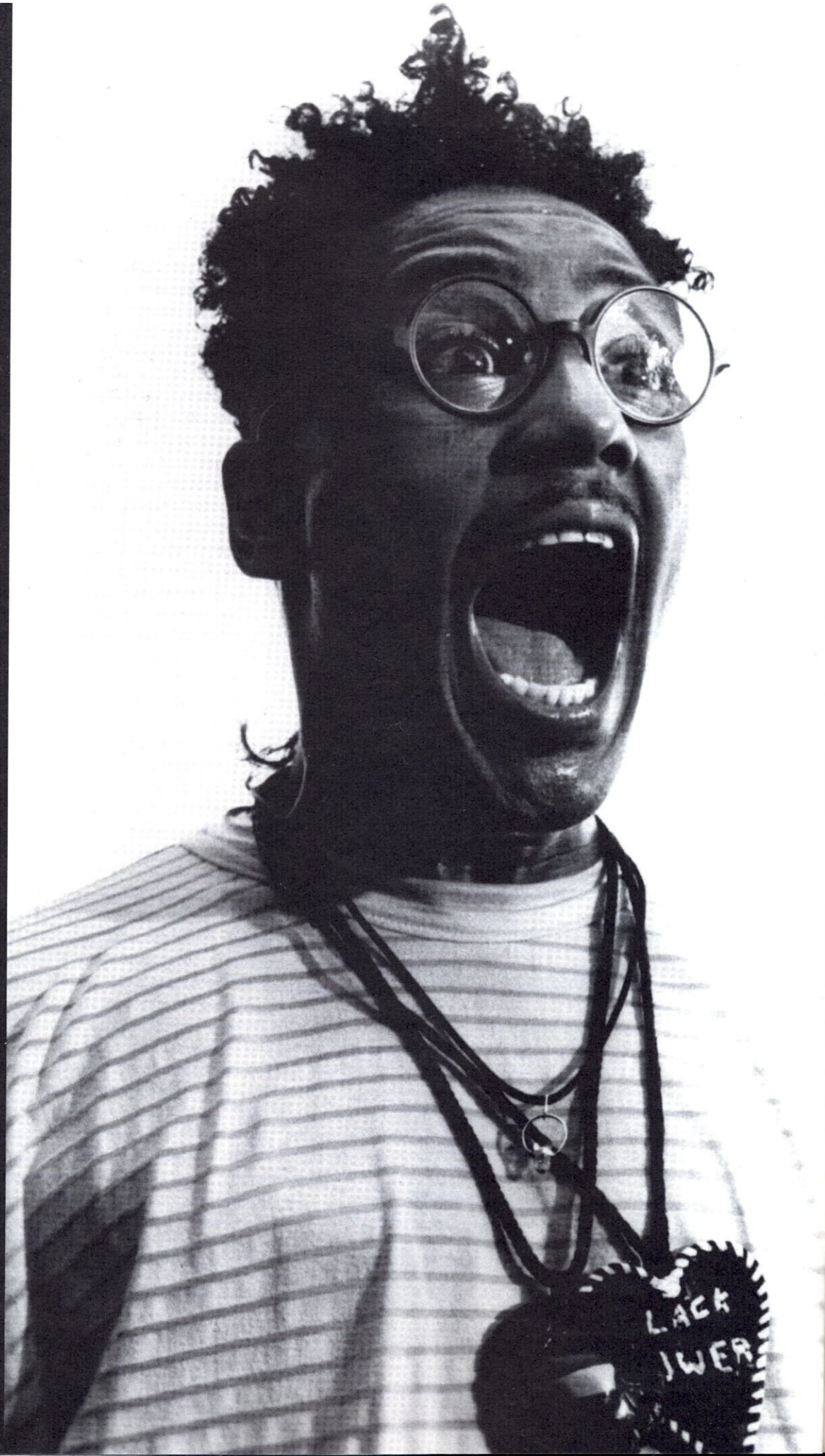
<sup>11</sup> Berger, pp. 46-55.

<sup>12</sup> Pauline Kael, *5001 Nights at the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), p. 334.



# DO THE RIGHT THING:

G E N E R I C B A S E S







Da Mayor (Ossie Davis) gives Mookie (Spike Lee) some advice.



Mother Sister (Ruby Dee) and Da Mayor.

## by Robert K. Lightning

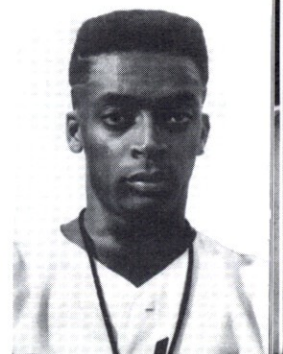
*Some years ago, I wrote an essay on **Do the Right Thing**. Disappointed when it provoked no particular interest, I abandoned it. This partial and somewhat undeveloped essay is a first attempt at revision. It begins by contextualizing **Do the Right Thing** within the period of its production and in relation to films on similar topics.*

*I am indebted to Robin Wood's **Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan**. In my experience the definitive work on the period of American filmmaking immediately preceding that of **Do the Right Thing**.*

Produced under very different conditions, the group of films to which *Do the Right Thing* belongs including the Hanif Kureishi scripted and Stephen Frears directed *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* and Isaac Julien's *Young Soul Rebels*, all produced between 1984 and 1991, mirrors an earlier genre, the 70's disaster film. The outline for the 70's films is familiar: a microcosm of American society faces a life threatening occurrence while on board a jetliner or ship, in a skyscraper, etc. The genre develops during an era of tremendous social upheaval characterized by its concern with disintegration, both psychological and social. As Robin Wood has noted several Hollywood genres (including the Western and Horror film) reach what he describes as their "Apocalyptic" phase where the social microcosm is completely destroyed (*Night of the Living Dead*, *The Wild Bunch* and *High Plains Drifter* are exemplary). Behind the annihilation is the sense not only that American bourgeois culture is irredeemably corrupt, but that political intervention is useless, too late to hold back the forces repressed by bourgeois culture, or (as in *Night*) the forces of repression are too powerful, annihilating all progressive efforts. By contrast the social world of the disaster films, though damaged, survives. Underlying the cultural resilience characterizing the genre, the films reveal a cynicism regarding humanity to which nihilism (which at least recognizes society's corruption) by comparison becomes a valid response.

Something of an aberration within 70's cinema, the disaster films' social world is noteworthy for the absence of those voices whose efforts (both organized and spontaneous) provided the impetus for social change. As Robin Wood has observed, the disaster becomes radical politics' symbolic rendering: the threatened group is overwhelmingly of the bourgeoisie or those conditioned to its norms. That social change is rendered symbolically is of the utmost necessity: in an era comparatively tolerant of progressive politics, the overt depiction of radicalism as threat would risk the loss of a significant portion of the film's potential audience and, hence, revenue.

The genre is an ultra-conservative extension of classical Hollywood narratives, for instance the multi-character/plot all-star social drama (e.g.: *Grand Hotel*). The emphasis on redemption and personal growth (for instance Dean Martin's philanderer in *Airport*) also suggests Hollywood medical dramas: those who can be salvaged for patriarchal capitalism are suitably reformed ("cured") and those who can't are eliminated. This genealogy is essential to the genre's partial ability to disarm (at least initially): it promised to reproduce the pleasures of classical Hollywood narratives. By neutralizing potential subver-





siveness in both the text and star persona (when not exaggerating them, as with Ava Gardner in *Earthquake*) the films connect with another exemplary conservative genre, the De Mille biblical epics. The similar pleasures encouraged by both the De Mille and 70's disaster films is revealing of the bourgeois audience's own ambivalence regarding capitalist culture. For although the disaster films offer the satisfaction of (to paraphrase the fictional mayor of L.A. in *Earthquake*) watching for the next few hours the bourgeoisie depend on its own physical and spiritual resources as well as the drama of personal redemption, what audiences pay to see and what the greatest portion of production expenditure is directed toward is the spectacle of bourgeois death and capitalism's destruction, with the comfort of knowing that, in the end, things will return safely to normal.

The disaster genre makes token condemnations of greedy capitalists, self-serving politicians, etc. But the system is never indicted. The *Airport* films in fact lay particular emphasis on the system's resilience while revealing a corresponding cynicism toward the actual middle class. In *Airport*, Burt Lancaster condemns the organized efforts of home owners to reduce noise pollution emanating from the airport, the film characterizing the home owners as self-serving and opportunistic. In *Airport '75* George Kennedy is even more explicit: having been accosted by a rather effeminate newscaster he comments "Sometimes the public's right to know gives me a pain in the ass" (a particularly revealing example of displacement given the genre's celebration of rugged masculinity). Thus the bourgeoisie (i.e. home owners and "The People") is tolerated as long as its needs don't interfere with the efficient running of the system. This particular insight into capitalism (tolerance of "the people" is limited to their function as consumers) parallels the film-maker's own cynicism: creating entertainment for middle-class consumption that displays capitalism's resilience in spite of the bourgeoisie's own desires. It seems very appropriate that Wood has labeled these films "producers' movies."

The same broad narrative outline serves for the 70's disaster film and the 80's urban disaster film: a cross section of capitalist society is linked by association to a certain space which at some point is threatened with violent destruction. Despite their very different realizations the 2 groups of films share the same creative impetus: in an era whose primary political direction runs contrary to a particular class or group, so much so that that group's very existence seems threatened, film-makers create works that make the case for that group's continued existence. In the 70's, when a fundamental transformation of

patriarchal capitalist structures seemed imminent, conservative values were promoted in the disaster epic. By the mid 80's, with both the U.S. and Britain under conservative governments, with laissez-faire economic politics promoted by those governments, with the middle class (not for the first time) withdrawing into a protective cocoon and replacing its support of progressive causes with a general tolerance if not support of nationalism, militarism and racism, the left becomes the explicit subject of the disaster narratives. Suddenly all those groups for whom the 70's disaster stood in — militants, people of colour, feminists, gays, students radicals, workers — are brought to the textual forefront. This is a result also of how they are produced. In contrast to the studio productions of the 70's the urban disaster films were produced among those writers, directors and producers who loosely comprise the 80's independent film movement, where financing is of a non-traditional nature (from credit cards to government sponsored television). The independents arise in response to an increasingly conservative mainstream cinema where those classical genres that seemed particularly to inspire profoundly political work of a subversive nature have been all but eliminated from studio output (e.g.: the woman's film). The overt political content of the urban disaster films precludes studio backing and goes some way in defining the concerns that recur throughout independent film. It is not surprising that even when studio financing is provided (as it was for *Do the Right Thing*), it is far more circumspect than for the usual studio product.

In the urban disaster film, the "Disaster" is an assault on private property initiated by the people in response to oppressive patriarchal capitalist forces. Hardly any of the films adhere exactly to this model. In *Rebels* the property is a public park. In *Laundrette* the "people" are a group of economically oppressed skin head youths. *Sammy and Rosie* offers a particularly effective variation. The people's revolt occurs early on in the film, the climactic act of destruction (at which most of the characters gather) is instead an action by the government, the somber razing of a squatter's camp. The effect is of an elegy for the people.

If the film's urban uprising evokes 60's protest, it is limited to the spontaneous, reactionary and destructive, a riot. Absent are the organized efforts of 60's radicals. When represented, political strategizing is pushed to the side and disqualified (*Buggin' Out* in *Do the Right Thing*) or not engaged in direct political action. (The woman's group seen throughout *Sammy and Rosie*). This would seem an accurate depiction of a political reality. With those groups that could loose-



ly by categorized as the left dissolving into smaller factions or disintegrating from external assault and/or internal tensions and with few groups replacing them (Act Up is one of the few engaged in 60's style protest), direct political action increasingly denotes anarchy. Effective organizational protest depends on a receptive public (i.e. a middle class tolerant of systemic change) and an involved media. If the former seems largely absent, it is a result, in part, of the absence of the latter. Recognizing its own investment in the status quo, the media have several tools at their disposal to limit public awareness, the most effective being to simply ignore dissension. Another strategy is to ignore the broader political significance of dissension: As most urban revolts are consigned by the media to "racial tensions" they become a matter of "those" people. I will return to this.

In a recent article, Robin Wood called for a unified left to "change everything, now" and it seems to me that the urban disaster film offers at least a partial response to this dictum. The film-makers return the problems of the patriarchal/capitalist system to those most oppressed by it to disabuse themselves of its influence. It is no coincidence then that in 3 of the films, a character who is both patriarch and capitalist is rendered impotent or destroyed by the conclusion. And even when the system's values are reasserted (as at the conclusion of *Do the Right Thing*) they have undergone such a thorough dismantling as to render the conclusion contradictory at best.

The 70's disaster genre's big, bejewelled symbol of capitalism (simultaneously product and profit maker, the former masking the latter function) is rendered small in the 80's films (becoming a bejewelled Laundromat or a pizzeria), the better to examine the mechanics of capitalism. *Laundrette* offers a telling analogy: The Laundromat is dependent upon and "launders" the drug money. It is only after the system has been attacked at its base (the destruction of property) that new social relationships are tentatively formed, represented symbolically at each film's conclusion: Sal and Mookie's goodbye in *Do the Right Thing*; Rebels' group dance; the husband's breakdown in *Sammy and Rosie*, and *Laundrette*'s ritual cleansing.

## A Brief Note on Terminology

By clarifying my use of two terms, anarchy and riot, I hope to define the type of political action depicted in the urban disaster film. Anarchy popularly signifies chaos. My intended meaning is closer to its root sense, an "absence of government." In its root sense it forms the basis of a political theory, with the ultimate aim of securing (according to Webster's New

World Dictionary) "individual liberty." If anarchy in the former sense is evidenced in the urban disaster film it cannot entirely define the action depicted. A sense of deliberate political intent is usually implied. In *Laundrette* the attack on the film's most ruthless capitalist is planned. In *Sammy and Rosie* the recurring destruction is presented as merely an aspect of urban life and it is treated by the main characters as a spectacle. Two moments in *Do the Right Thing* underscore this interpretation: The attack on Sal's is withheld while Mookie literally deliberates; the decision not to attack the Korean grocery is a result of an impromptu debate. If one interprets "without government" as encompassing actions outside of existing government prompted by government oppression, these actions fit the definition.

This interpretation holds even though we are free to disagree with the politics of the attackers: The attackers in *Laundrette* are skin heads; the destruction and near destruction in *Do the Right Thing* cannot be entirely cleansed of personal animus and retaliation.

If anarchy in its popular sense is divorced from political theory, the media's use of "riot" limits the political implications of the actions described. "Riot" almost implies dissension that is exclusively racial in origin; the destruction of property characteristic of riots is assigned to race and is interpreted as behavioral. Racism in public life on the other hand is generally denied by the media (and politicians), accompanied by the vehement condemnation or belittling of those who raise the issue (The media treatment of O.J. Simpson's defense lawyer, Johnnie Cochran, as a recent example). However, like the repressed, the issue of racism, though denied, returns to haunt public life in interesting forms. It should come as not a surprise then that merely raising the subject to the level of public debate is often interpreted (by the media, by politicians) as potentially provoking insurrection, an inadvertent confirmation of continued relevance.

That race is a component of the urban disaster films is obvious but the destruction depicted cannot be limited to racial causes.

In *Laundrette* an attacker diverts his final assault from a human target to the laundrette's plate glass window. The destruction in *Sammy and Rosie* is (as in *Do the Right Thing*) exclusively aimed at property. And in *Do the Right Thing*, Lee includes a shot of Sal's cash register. The specificity of the destruction is another aspect of its political nature and clearly an attack on capitalism is implied. The final effect is of an attempt to neutralize economic forces. As Rosie notes (In *Sammy and Rosie*) "a kind of justice is being done."





# By Any Meanings Necessary:

Conflict and its Resolution in Do the Right Thing



## by Ted Kulczycky

It has become a cliché to assert that “conflict is the basis of all drama.” In Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) conflict is more than a structural necessity: conflict is the explicit subject matter and ultimately saturates every element of this film. Appropriately enough, conflict has also proved to be the only constant in discussions of Lee’s work. Like many of the characters in *Do the Right Thing*, the vast majority of critics have been quick to choose sides, either condemning or praising Lee’s film. Much of this debate has centred on a single scene. Mookie, portrayed by Lee himself, throws a trash can through the window of his place of employment, Sal’s Famous Pizzeria. While the moral implications of this scene have been discussed ad nauseam, a number of important considerations about the film have been completely overlooked:

1. While some theorists take great care to catalogue the “internal contradictions” and “shifting antimonies” in certain films, no one has yet taken on the task of a comprehensive indexing of the conflicts within and surrounding *Do the Right Thing*. Surely, a film expressly about conflict deserves this type of analysis.
2. Whether or not we agree or disagree with what we perceive as *Do the Right Thing*’s political stance, we must acknowledge that films and filmmakers are not born from vacuums. Regardless of Lee’s artistic and political intentions, the film (like all art) is also a product of the society in which it was created. Hence, the film is not merely a projection of Lee’s political views but also a reflection of our culture as a whole. Our extreme reactions to the film might suggest more about the way we as individuals and as a society understand racial conflict, and conflict in general, than they do about Spike Lee’s political agenda.

### Conflict in Bedford-Stuyvesant

Every level of meaning in *Do the Right Thing* is saturated with conflict. Most apparent are the conflicts between characters. There are at least one hundred and twenty four separate confrontations in the film’s screenplay. Although distinct, these incidents are not isolated. One of Lee’s strongest skills as a writer is his ability to carry emotional overtones across

scenes and sequences. After Sal (Danny Aiello) finally gets Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) to turn off his boombox during their initial confrontation, we hear Raheem shout from off-screen, “Yo! Put some more mozzarella on that motherfucker n’ shit.” This line echoes Sal’s earlier encounter with Buggin’ Out (Giancarlo Esposito), cuing us to the compounded tensions Sal is experiencing. Ultimately, this cumulative tension informs the climax, as do pervasive conflicts from the real world (the Howard Beach incident, among others, is referred to directly). In the complex web of tensions, a number of distinct types of conflict can be distilled. Obviously, issues of race dominate but they do not supersede other concerns.

Our first exposure to the tensions between characters follows D.J. Mister Senior Love Daddy’s (Sam Jackson) radio wake up call. Mookie wakes his sister, Jade (Joie Lee), who informs him angrily that “Saturday is the only day I get to sleep in.” As Mookie persists, Jade demands “Shouldn’t you be at work?”. The next conflict we witness is again between siblings. Sal tells Pino (John Turturro) to sweep the stoop of the pizzeria. Pino promptly passes the task to Vito (Richard Edson) who objects, “Pop asked YOU.” Their ensuing spat prompts Sal to note “I’m going to kill somebody today.” In these two scenes, Lee introduces familial conflict and hints at the gender conflict that will be explored later. Considering that Lee himself has four siblings, it should come as no surprise that familial tensions form a major theme. Territorial disputes also run rampant in Lee’s *Bed-Stuy*. A minor but illustrative example is the boombox duel between Radio Raheem and Stevie (Luis Ramos). More interesting is the confrontation between Buggin’ Out and the white yuppie, Clifton (John Savage). Ostensibly about damage to a pair of sneakers, the argument rapidly escalates to Buggin’ Out’s rhetorical “Who told you to buy a brownstone in my neighbourhood!?” Issues of race are here inextricably linked to issues of territory.

Related to the territorial disputes is the confrontation between the Mayor and Ahmad. “Who elected you Mayor of this block anyhow?” queries the younger challenger. The Mayor attacks the man’s youth, suggesting that Ahmad “can’t pee straight” and that his parents raised him better than that. This scene’s subtext hints at other types of conflict as well, but clearly part of the problem is a generation gap.

Money is also a source of conflict for the citizens of the block. Buggin’ Out and Sal’s initial confrontation begins with a dispute over the price of extra cheese. The tension builds as Buggin’ Out demands that Sal put some photos of African-Americans on the pizzeria’s “Wall of Fame,” which consists entirely of





Italian-Americans: "Since we spend much money in here we do have some say." When Sal refuses, Buggin' attempts to organize a boycott in the hope that economic pressure will change Sal's mind.

Sexual tension is also in evidence, although not as explicitly as in some of Lee's other films. Sal's painfully obvious flirtations with Jade evoke negative reactions from both Pino and Mookie, as we can tell from a tracking shot of the identical expressions on their faces. Mother Sister's (Ruby Dee) insults eventually become a form of flirtation as her relationship with the Mayor improves. Mookie's relationship with Tina (Rosie Perez) is portrayed as passionate but strained, due to Mookie's difficulty in accepting his responsibilities. Both Tina and Jade repeatedly remind Mookie that he has commitments that he must try to live up to. Although Lee portrays some of his characters within the gendered stereotypes of "women as responsible nags" vs. "men as irresponsible good-for-nothings," he weaves these questions of responsibility more deeply into the film's conflictive network.

Most of Sal's confrontations with Mookie stem from Mookie's disregard for his responsibilities as an employee. Buggin's exhortation to "Stay Black" is intended to remind Mookie that he has obligations that may take priority over his commitment to his employer. Both the title of the film and its climax

relate to questions of responsibility. Had any of the characters involved in the climax behaved more responsibly, Radio Raheem's death (and therefore the destruction of Sal's pizzeria) could have been avoided. Sal could have put African-Americans on the wall, or been slower to reach for his baseball bat. Buggin' Out could have been, as Jade puts it, "down for something positive in the community." Mookie might have actually become involved in the dispute while there was still a chance of diffusing the tension. Sal could have politely asked Raheem to turn down the music. Instead he bellows, "No service until you turn that shit off." Indeed, on any day other than the hottest of the year, the fate of these characters may have been quite different. As Lee notes in his pre-production journal, "It's been my observation that when the temperature rises beyond a certain point, people lose it...the heat makes everything explosive, including the racial climate." The characters are, in a sense, engaged in a conflict with the environment itself.

#### **The Non-diegetic Conflicts of *Do the Right Thing*: Sights**

One of the few aspects of Lee's work that is not the subject of fierce debate is his working familiarity with a wide variety of cinematic techniques, as well as his willingness to experiment with them undogmatically. Lee used to deny stylistic influences beyond

Mookie expostulates with Vito (Richard Edson).





Jarmusch, Scorsese and Van Peebles, but has recently confessed a surprising fondness for such films as *Help!* (1965, Richard Lester) and *A Face in the Crowd* (1957, Elia Kazan). Lee's wide range of influences is perhaps most evidenced in *Do the Right Thing*.

Expressionist influences are exhibited in the film's opening dance sequence. The stylized two-dimensional backdrop combines with high contrast (yet colourful) lighting to evoke the horrible worlds of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). Of course, many expressionist codes have been adopted by mainstream music videos and because of this their use here seems less anachronistic than some of Lee's other techniques.

Contrasting the expressionism is Lee's use of the conventional codes of realism. In most scenes, Lee obeys the dictums of the classic Hollywood continuity editing style. Eyelines always match; the axis of action is usually obeyed (barring a new establishing shot); dialogue is often covered in the "shot/reverse shot" manner. The finer points of the style are also in evidence. Tradition has it that cuts should be "smooth" and not jar the eye of the spectator. Thus, when cutting between two shots of the same subject, image size and/or camera angle should change so the change is not perceived as the mere absence of frames, or a "jump". Our introduction to "the corner men" begins with an extreme long shot, then cuts to a long shot and finally ends on a medium three-shot. Although he does not change the angle, Lee smooths the cuts by using the passing cars as wipes. Lee does not restrict the film's realism to the editing. While we are concentrating on the activity inside Sal's, a passing glance through the window will reveal other recognizable characters going about their business on the street. This passive use of deep-focus photography reinforces the sense of a real world, which exists with or without the direct attention of the camera.

A multitude of hand-held and zoom shots appeal to codes of ultra-realism familiar from documentaries. One might expect this style to clash violently with the classical cutting habits, but Lee somehow manages to get them to hang together. When Sal asks Mookie to remove Buggin' from the pizzeria, the camera that had provided the establishing medium shot follows the two out the door. After their conversation on the street the camera pulls back into the pizzeria, following Mookie. It comes to rest in a new position, thus providing a new establishing shot. A conversation between Sal, Pino and Mookie ensues and subsequent cuts obey the new axis of action.

The illusion of reality is partially broken by a string of direct addresses to the camera. A quick zoom forward introduces the slanderous soliloquies. As

Mookie, Pino, Stevie, the Policeman, and Sonny deliver in turn their hateful speeches, the camera holds fast, dead on. This direct address seems inspired by Jean Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967), but is also reminiscent of Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* (1968). Certainly, Radio Raheem's similarly-shot speech regarding love and hate was inspired by Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* (1955). Whatever the sources, Lee's break with traditional realism has an atypical effect in this sequence. Due to the build up of tension throughout the course of the narrative, we experience a sense of mounting alienation (parallel to that of the characters) and thus anticipate a cathartic release. These racist rants satisfy our expectations, while their crudity increases the overall tone of alienation. The usual effect of this type of break from realism is simply the subversion of audience expectation as a reminder of film's constructed nature. Here, Lee's use of the direct address actually fuels our involvement with the narrative, at the same time as it makes us uncomfortable with our character empathization.

Love and hate figure in the most drastically conflicting of Lee's styles. Lee uses a number of techniques inspired by 1920's Soviet filmmakers. Montage sequences are now common currency in virtually every style of filmmaking, and Lee's use of them merits no special attention. More subtle techniques, such as Eisenstein's "Rhythmic Montage" have also found their way into many types of film. However, "repeat cuts" have enjoyed but two brief resurgences (in Godard and Music Videos) and have never really been explored enough to better Eisenstein's delicate use of them in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). By 1989, even MTV had deemed them passé and it seems odd that two of them appear in *Do the Right Thing*. One occurs upon Mookie's reunion with Tina. We see the same shot of their kiss twice in quick succession. After Mookie yells "HATE!", we see the projectile trash can break through the pizzeria window twice (although from different shots). These doublings are used (like the repeat cuts in *Potemkin* regarding revolutionary consciousness) to accentuate decisive action (here regarding love and hate).

Lee's film also contains a number of "long takes." Most notable is a six-minute scene that occurs precisely at the film's midpoint. Sal and Pino discuss the future of their business in the window of the pizzeria. The six-minute scene is covered by a single shot that begins with a brief zoom in. Although often associated with Welles, the long take style is usually considered to have reached its zenith in the work of the Italian neorealists. Their over-arching aesthetic demanded that cinema be ultra-real. Characters had to be human, and plots had



to be about common everyday occurrences. Most importantly, the neorealists held that style and artistic embellishments should be shunned as much as possible. If a scene could be covered by a single shot, then it was. Many consider the neorealists to be the polar opposite of the Soviet school. Where the Soviet films focused on mass revolts, the neorealists concerned themselves with individual hardship. Where the Soviets utilized abstract symbolism, the neorealists shunned all metaphor. Where the Soviets might have thirty cuts in twenty seconds of film, the neorealists might have none in eight minutes of screen time.

It is not entirely unheard of for a filmmaker to be influenced by both neorealism and Soviet montage. However, repeat cuts and five minute static takes seem to be at the extremes of each technique. Lee's solution to this conflict of styles is undramatic. Neither style proves its supremacy, nor do they coalesce into a compromised synthesis. The conflicting styles simply co-exist, side by side, in the same motion picture.

#### **The Non-diegetic Conflicts of *Do the Right Thing* Sounds**

To date, the most coherent articles written about *Do the Right Thing* have examined its relationship to various musical styles. More will be said about this later, but Victoria E. Johnson's *Polyphony and Cultural Expression* seems the definitive work on Lee's use of music. A brief survey of Johnson's model of Lee's musical system will reveal conflict within the soundtrack of *Do the Right Thing*.

Johnson posits the presence of two distinct types of music in the film. She labels these the historic-nostalgic, and the contemporary-popular. The very first clash of the film is between these styles. As the studio logo appears on-screen, we hear several quiet bars of a mournful and complacent saxophone. Suddenly as the screen goes red we hear the aggressive rhythmic opening of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power."

Within each of these styles are further divisions. The historic-nostalgic cleaves into romantic folk-inflected string arrangements and jazz. This division is heard during Pino and Sal's long discussion. The light string arrangements that begin the scene are overtaken by the struggling jazz riffs that creep in as their conversation intensifies.

The contemporary-popular tradition segments into several fragments but can be characterized as "rap vs. everything else." The obvious example is Raheem and Stevie's boombox duel. Johnson suggests that the film's musical clashes jolt the "classical spectator" (who is passively manipulated by the music) into an active role. This is perhaps putting it too strongly. Many spectators may be completely accustomed to (and, for that matter, enjoy) both hip-hop and jazz. However, it

is likely that the different musics have different effects and carry different associations for the polyglot spectator. While the music can be taken at face value, each of these divisions carry cultural connotations which encourage individual interaction with the musical text, regardless of a conscious "jolt".

Again, *Do the Right Thing* exhibits no attempt to somehow reconcile conflicting styles. Jazz and hip-hop just co-exist within the film without either becoming "victorious" and without either being compromised into a "synthesis".

#### **Conflicting Ideologies, the Ideology of Conflict**

The power of language is often discussed, but only non-verbal artists ever take note of its essential weaknesses. It is unfortunate that we who live by the word (i.e. academics) do not assess its inadequacies more often because such discussions will ultimately benefit our language and ourselves. Many of our words, like all cultural artifacts, are laden with hidden values, judgments, and perhaps even ideologies.

The words conflict, contest, and contradict are but a few of the words we often use interchangeably to describe a particular phenomenon. When we see this phenomenon occur within something we understand to be an individual unit, we use words like unintelligible, irrational or incoherent. When we see this phenomenon dissipate between individuals, we use words such as resolution, reconcile and solution. It seems, initially, appropriate enough to use any or all of these terms in discussions of *Do the Right Thing*. However, close examination of critical responses to the film, in light of its treatment of the Martin Luther King/Malcom X dichotomy, suggest that these terms may, one and all, misrepresent the film's approach to conflict.

The first real critical response to the film occurred following its premiere screening in competition at the 1989 Cannes film festival. Reportedly it failed to win any awards because jury chairman, Wim Wenders, felt that Mookie didn't behave like a hero.

Wenders was seriously confused about both the film and the conflict in it. He was obviously reading the conflicts in the film as some sort of racial game with heroes and villains. Probably, Wenders is not so simple as to expect a "good guys beat the bad guys" ending. Perhaps he was expecting Mookie to somehow stop the police from murdering Radio Raheem. More likely, he saw the Malcom X point of view as decidedly unheroic. He wanted Mookie not to throw the trash can and instead (in Pino's words) "talk some brother-talk" to calm the rioters and create racial harmony.

If Wenders was not simple enough to expect a "good guys triumph" ending, some American critics



recognized one in the climax of *Do the Right Thing*. Terrence Rafferty wrote in the *New Yorker*: "Raheem certainly doesn't deserve his fate but without the racial epithet Lee would have a hard time convincing any audience that Sal deserves his... if you think, as I do, that not every individual is a racist, that angry words are no more revealing than any other kind, and that trashing a small business is a woefully imprecise image of fighting the power, then you have to conclude that Spike Lee has taken a wild shot and missed the target". Surprisingly enough, Spike Lee seems to think as Terrence Rafferty does. When asked if destroying the pizzeria was "fighting the power," Lee replied: "It's the power at the moment. But when it's burnt down, he's back to square one, even worse...(all you end up with is no place to have pizza)... that's very powerful at the moment but it's fleeting". Lee and Rafferty seem to be in full agreement about the destruction of the pizzeria. So, either the film misrepresents Lee's beliefs or Rafferty's reading is way off the mark.

Given Lee's skills as a filmmaker, it seems more likely that Rafferty's contempt stems directly from his own ideology about drama, the King/X dichotomy and conflict in general. He automatically interprets Mookie's actions as "the right thing" and therefore assumes that the climax is meant to represent the triumph of good heroes over evil villains. He goes on to suggest that the King/X quotes which end the film are merely token gestures of ambivalence, masking Lee's allegiance to the X school. The above quote from Lee, which portrays the riot as ultimately unproductive, is an obvious representation of King's "eye for an eye leaves everybody blind." If Lee's ambivalence is tokenistic, he is remarkably convincing. Rafferty is assuming that everyone (filmmaker and spectator) has a preformed opinion (i.e. ideology) that is either to be

John Turturro as Pino.







### Postmodernity and the Right Thing?

James Hurst suggests that *Do the Right Thing* represents the cinematic component of hip-hop culture. When his article was published (1990) very little had been written about hip-hop. Since that time, much work has been done and a number of illuminating theories have come to light. One of the explanations bandied about most is 'postmodernism.'

Postmodernism continues to be the subject of much theoretical and political debate. Part of the problem is the free use of the term to designate phenomena as disparate as socio-historic-economic conditions and a species of critical inquiry. Moreover, as Jonathan Arac notes, the line between the theoretical and the political debates is unclear and thus, "to 'have a position' on postmodernism means not just to give an analysis of its genesis and contours, but to let the world know whether you are for or against it, and in fairly bold terms." Many hold that postmodernism, in its resistance to metanarratives, signals the end of history and the death of politics. Luckily for the doomsayers, postmodernism still seems to lack any comprehensive theoretical paradigm. The best that we can do, according to Jim Collins, is address a series of recurring themes.

The key precondition for postmodernism is the bombardment of signs. Known as a semiotics of excess, postmodernism presupposes the proliferation of symbols and texts that we encounter in our mass-mediated urban world. Following from this condition are intertextuality and hyperconsciousness. Hyperconsciousness is the psychological response to/symptom of the proliferation. Intertextuality is simply the perceived presence of pre-existing or co-exist-

projected (for the filmmaker) or reinforced (for the spectator). In Rafferty's vision, no one is allowed the privilege of confusion, doubt, or open-mindedness.

Lee's supporters can be equally simplistic. Although none has suggested that Lee falls into the King camp, a number of critics believe the film portrays a compromising "synthesis" of the King and X views. James Hurst suggests that Mookie's toss of the trash can both saves Sal's life, and sparks the riot that destroys the "endorsed establishment of the hegemony." While not an inaccurate reading of the film, Mookie's action, thus interpreted, does not have the makings of a coherent synthesis of X and King. Lee noted the futility of the destruction, and Hurst notes that the act is based in hate. Neither Lee nor Hurst seems to be portraying X as an advocate of hateful futile violence. The violence condoned by Malcom X was explicitly "self defense".

Perhaps Hurst is invoking pan-Africanist Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon suggests that the psychological damage rendered by institutionalized racism can be reversed through violent catharsis. This point of view is much more difficult to "synthesize" with King's as it explicitly feeds "the downward spiral."

Lee has claimed that the film is, indeed, a synthesis. But, as noted at the outset, filmmakers and films are subject to cultural forces that are not necessarily conscious or intentional. In *Do the Right Thing*, no particular ideology is valorized and no contradictions are synthesized.



ing texts within an individual work. Both *Do the Right Thing* and hip-hop exhibit evidence of all of these themes. In any one hip-hop song, an almost infinite number of previously recorded songs may be digitally sampled. As we have seen, *Do the Right Thing* references a remarkable range of cinematic and musical styles while engaging in a political dialogue that precedes and surrounds the film. Advocates of postmodernism call this political/aesthetic system "bricolage", while opponents call it "cannibalism."

The most distinguishing, and most contentious, characteristic of postmodernism is its accommodation of multiple and contradictory "subject positions". Advocates hold that postmodernism is the only critical theory capable of recognizing a spectrum of spectatorship. Assuming a relativist stance, postmodernism rejects both the hypodermic model of the subject (values directly injected into the spectator) and the "free will" notion (texts having no significant effect). Postmodern subjects position themselves within a text, based on any combination of social, cultural, aesthetic, moral or political factors. This supposedly accounts not only for multiple and contradictory readings of texts, but also for a text's inherent contradictions.

*Do the Right Thing* is a film rife with contradictions. As a postmodern text, it displays no internal compulsion to somehow resolve them. Throughout the film, Mookie wrestles with relative subject positions (employee of Sal's, big brother of Jade, father, and irresponsible child). Following the murder of Raheem, Mookie is forced by the crowd to "take a position." Any course of action he follows will be "right" for only some of his multiple positions. When he throws the trash can, Mookie does what he feels is the most responsible thing possible, based on a negotiation between his feelings and his chosen subject position. It is no coincidence that his moment of decision coincides with a point of view shot that surveys the various proponents of his possible choices. It is at one and the same time the right thing and the wrong thing. Mookie is no hero and he enacts no brilliant synthesis of conflicting political stances. Rather, he is forced into an expression of conflicting identities.

### Conflict, Generation X and Me

With all this talk about responsibility and subjectivity, I feel some compulsion to address my own "position". 1989 was a year of major upheaval for me. As a white, middle-class male I had long considered myself a "liberal", and subscribed to most of the beliefs that go along with that title. A nasty case of philosophical frustration combined with a number of congruent events to catalyze a major re-examination of my values along a less simple path. *Do the Right Thing* was part

of that process. Long having professed a "zero tolerance" for violence, *Do the Right Thing* forced me to reexamine my position. I still don't know where I stand on this issue, especially regarding experiences that I couldn't begin to relate to. While I find the charges of anti-semitism, sexism, and homophobia levelled at Lee's films irrefutable, I still must acknowledge *Do the Right Thing* as one of the reasons I am even able to comprehend these criticisms. Perhaps one of my own internal contradictions...

One of the first things that struck me about the film is how much it resembles the children's television show *Sesame Street*. Lee's visual construction of Bed-Stuy virtually quotes the structure of *Sesame Street*. In fact the film's whole aesthetic principle is reminiscent of the show, with musical interludes, speeches to the camera and so on. The general idea for this essay was sparked during a lecture on hip-hop, in which the speaker suggested that *Sesame Street* was a major aesthetic structural influence on hip-hop culture. Noting that *Sesame Street* was conceived as a positive response for children to the bombardment of signs, it struck me that any North American under the age of eight in 1968, including Lee, grew up watching the show. Ironically it's probably the only common experience most of us have.

We are also of the generation labelled "X", and although I have campaigned vigorously to try to shrug off this designation, several generalizations bear some relevance to this discussion. The "bombardment of signs" is almost a given for most of us. We have also borne witness to the failure/co-optation of the sixties' counter-cultural movements. The conservative retrenchment seems to run deeper with each passing moment. Frequently, hopes for a more egalitarian society are superseded by questions of mere survival.

I don't see our society's deepest conflicts ever being resolved through compromise or victory for any side. I just hope we can survive the confrontations, and perhaps derive something positive from the differences. I've always understood *Do the Right Thing* to share this position. As DJ Mister Senor Love Daddy puts it:

My people, my people. Are we gonna live together?  
Together are we gonna live?

### The Conceit of Postmodernity

I suggested above that postmodernist rhetoric often proclaims "the death of history," thereby positing itself as "cutting edge" and historically unique. It is perhaps too easy to fall into this kind of egoism and proclaim that hip-hop, extreme alienation, and strange ways of coping with stylistic and ideological conflict are brand new and virtually unique unto people my age.

Consider hip-hop. Trisha Rose holds that the fre-



quent digital sampling of older funk, soul and jazz records serves to situate the performer "within an Afro-American musical tradition, and a self-constructed resistive history". This seems remarkably heritage-conscious for a postmodern form that supposedly resists "metanarratives".

For that matter, the manner of coping with conflict discussed above existed prior to the postmodern age. Musicologist Peter Guralnick has suggested that: the principals of (sixties soul music) brought to it such divergent outlooks and experiences that even if they had grown up in the same little town, they were as widely separated as if there had been an ocean between them. And when they came together, it may well have been their strangeness to each other, as well as their familiarity, that caused the cultural explosion.

Guralnick is positing soul music as a product of the interaction of individuals who are somehow conflicting and coalescing at the same time. This very "postmodern" aesthetic principle can be traced even further back. John Chernoff has found that African music uses "the multiple and fragmented aspects of everyday events to build a richer and more diversified personal experience". It seems that postmodernism may not be so new after all.

### Paradoxes

The fragmented identities and multiple subjectivities are considered by many to be a "negative" effect of postmodernism. But some Western cultural critics of African heritage have offered a very different assessment of the fractured postmodern identity. Stuart Hall writes:

Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I become centred. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be the representative modern experience!...welcome.

Hall, a British-Jamaican, believes that his experience of dislocation is representative of many "migrants" to white-dominated, Western societies. As white society feels more and more fractured, Hall's own fragmentation somehow becomes centred. Hall labels this a "paradox".

I suggested above that our understandings of conflict, contradiction and resolution are frequently too narrow to accommodate the facts of our experience. We tend to attach the label, "paradox" when we encounter truths that we believe to be contradictory. Frequently, it is this type of encounter which forces us to re-evaluate our contexts of understanding. This situation has occurred many times in history. I have tried to show that African-derived musical traditions have tended to be structured such that they

can accommodate contradictory truths. If, as suggested above, *Do the Right Thing* is the cinematic equivalent of hip-hop it should come as no surprise that it deals with its contradictory styles and ideologies by a "richer more diversified experience".

Of course, European-derived intellectual systems have confronted paradoxes as well. However, we frequently put up some resistance. Many European biologists denied the existence of Australian animals because they believed that no creature can be both bird and mammal.

In the twentieth century we have confronted sciences that say light is both a particle and a wave (but not a compromise of particle and wave), multi-cultural cultures, and global villages. To point a finger at these phenomena and shout "incoherent" is to expose a limitation in our way of thinking. When examining the violence/non-violence debate and *Do the Right Thing*, the trick is not judgement, but rather, understanding.

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# MULTICULTURALISM AND SPIKE LEE'S MIXED MESSAGES

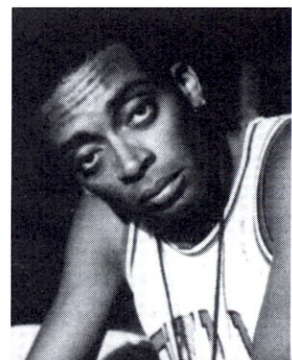
The late twentieth-century world can be characterised as one profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, gender and sexuality. Spike Lee's films take place within the context of this broken world. Two of the most challenging and controversial films in the last decade, *Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever*, have attempted to make some sense of this mess. Both films are about racial tension and conflict. Not surprisingly, both films carry similarly confused and mixed messages as to what it means to live in a separate and unequal racist society. These films are presented as attempts to shatter myths and defy accepted notions of racial reasoning. Yet, Lee's films lack the courage or intelligence to carry this off. By failing to confront the complexity of the issues in a candid and clear manner, Spike Lee's films offer a bland vision of a divided world that only serves to reinforce narrow discussions of race, which suppress who and what we are as a culturally diverse community.

From an outside perspective, what looks like a sensible way to evaluate the thinking of black America is to construct a division between two bodies of thought. One group is politically radical and separatist, the other is conservative and assimilationist. Yet, what is really going on in black America does not seem to fit into these categories. The main issue intellectually seems to be one of ethnic and cultural identity. This argument over black identity continues on its own terms, not the outside world's. It does however, have an effect on the outside world.

The civil rights movement provided an arena for political action aimed at destroying segregation. It helped forge this consensus among most blacks and whites. Today, however, many blacks are confused and angered by the failure of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "dream". There is little apparent agreement or even optimism about the future. Many young blacks (middle-class ones in particular) feel they need to rid themselves of their sense of ambiguity and the precariousness of their belonging. For many of them (and this is not entirely unjustified) integration is a

BY MITCHELL SHORE

Above: Mookie and Tina (Rosie Perez) in *Do the Right Thing*. Right: Angie (Annabella Sciorra) and Flipper (Wesley Snipes) in *Jungle Fever*. Far Right: Spike Lee in *Do The Right Thing*.







Radio Raheem and his boombox.



badge of dishonour, shame, and inferiority. There is a sense that integration has been achieved at the expense of black identity.

In the midst of a white majority culture, it is no surprise that we are witnessing an intensification of ethnic identity consciousness. The promise of ethnic assimilation has been accompanied by an unmistakable rise in cultural nationalism and black power thinking. Nationalist politics attempt to offer understanding and cohesion to the psychological and social meaning of blackness.

The issues of multiculturalism have much to do with present day racial polarization. The politics of racial mixing represent a coming together of two powerful and related ideologies - old-fashioned white racism and modern-day black nationalism. These ideas which see race as a community - an invisible refuge - demand a stifling conformity. Far from being imaginative or innovative, these visions are closed and philistine. It is on this canvas that Lee paints his portrait of America.

1989's *Do The Right Thing* began where Lee's previous film *School Daze* ended; with a call to "WAKE UP". Presumably, this sets the tone for what the film's message is to be. The politically explosive message of *Do The Right Thing* does not give its audience the choice to leave sleeping.

The film is set on one block in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, on a sweltering summer day. It is a community filled with a variety of stylishly dressed, but supposedly lower class, blacks and Hispanics. As the day wears on, it becomes clear that this is less a film about the people than it is about the issues of racism, loyalty, and violence. The people we are introduced to are all suffering from defeat. They are a raging and angry community.

The obvious outsiders in the community are the Korean grocery store owners, the white yuppie who owns a Brownstone, and most significantly the white Italian owners of the pizzeria, Sal the friendly but take-no-shit patriarch, and his two sons Pino and Vito. We quickly learn that Sal and his family are the villains, not so much because of their racism, (almost everyone in this film displays some form of intolerance); rather, they are bad because, as the last white-owned business on the block, they are seen as a source of white power and culture. Despite being an informal community centre for 25 years, Sal's pizzeria is unwilling to put up pictures of black folk on the Italian wall of fame.

Sal's Famous Pizzeria is the centre of *Do The Right Thing*. The action here centres around the militant but ineffectual Buggin' Out, the boom-box blasting Radio Raheem, and the stuttering and incoherent Smiley. They all clearly represent the powerlessness, frustration and inexpressibility of what it is to be black in a white soci-

ety. In reaction to the refusal of Sal to put up pictures of "some black people", these three decide to boycott the restaurant. This notion of boycott lacks any clear plan and as a result is met with ridicule and deaf ears among the members of the community.

In the middle of this is Mookie. He acts as a link between the two tribes.

**As laconically portrayed by Lee, Mookie is a man stuck uneasily in the middle. "Yo, Mookie stay black!" Buggin' Out warns him after being removed from Sal's. Seconds later inside the shop Sal tells him, "I'm the boss!". The Jackie Robinson jersey that Mookie wears does not suggest that he's a racial pioneer but that he's a man watched closely by interested parties on both sides of the racial divide. Both sides think he's loyal to them - that's how he survives.<sup>1</sup>**

The challenge this film presents is how Mookie will navigate around the looming conflict and what side he will decide to take when it matters most. Whether or not Mookie does the right thing is the question we are all expected to answer.

Lee also introduces representatives of the older generation. There is the philosophical old drunk Da Mayor who gets no respect, and the caustically wise matriarchal black woman Mother Sister. These two are matched against a middle-aged trio of sharp-talking street commentators who don't appear to do much more than sit around and hold their dicks. These are also frustrated people who have lost or failed in some way, yet they still manage, with an ethic of survival, to keep their chins up.

In spite of the animosity or disrespect between the members of the black community presented by Lee, there are no essential divisions between them. In Spike's Bed-Stuy there is an idealized picture of unbroken racial unity among the disenfranchised.

Tensions underlie everything that goes on in this film. And as heat is apt to inspire, the tensions build from petty grievances into uncontrollable rage. Despite all the attempts at cooling down, be it taking showers, playing with a fire hydrant, or drinking beer, the heat and anger remain.

Eventually, the boycotting and militant trio enter Sal's place with the hip-hop anthem of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" playing on the boombox. They confront Sal with their issue and make their demands known. Sal tells them to shut the radio off and get out.

<sup>1</sup> Nelson George, "Do The Right Thing: Film and Fury", in *The Films of Spike Lee: Five for Five*, (Stewart, Tabori and Chang, New York 1991) p.80.



When they refuse Sal explodes. He calls Radio Raheem a "nigger" and smashes the box with a bat. A fight breaks out and Radio is subdued by the white police who arrive in droves. He is put in a vicious choke hold by one cop and brutally murdered. "When the racial call is given, all forms of alienation dissolve and the neighbourhood merges into ANGRY BLACK PEOPLE led into a riot."<sup>2</sup> Mookie leads the riot into action by throwing a trash can through the window. After a horrific scene of burning and looting, Sal's place is destroyed in retribution for the death.

Mookie's challenge reaches its climax here. On one side he has his community protesting and furious. On the other side there is Sal. Sal clearly has the anger of the mob directed at him. He will have to take the responsibility of Radio's death in one way or another. Given this dilemma it is difficult to see how Mookie can do the right thing. Instead, with a bitter twist of irony, Mookie heeds Sal's advice and does what he's gotta do. For this brief moment he relinquishes his link between the white and the black community and makes a deliberate choice. With an ambiguous cry of "HATE" he smashes the window. Whether or not he has done the right thing is irrelevant. Mookie has stayed black and loyal. This is all that matters. Sadly, in the end we are only left with a burned down restaurant and a black community that has in essence inflicted damage on itself. No oppressive structures are challenged, no power has been fought.

The movie does not end with violence, rather it ends with an early morning discussion between Sal and Mookie among the debris of the burnt pizzeria. The short scene leaves open a number of questions about what the future of this community will hold. This, like all the other questions raised in this film, is unanswerable. We are simply left with the two apparently contradictory quotes that close the film, one by Martin Luther King jr. that takes a position against violence and the other by Malcolm X that calls violence in self-defence intelligence. It is an upsetting ending meant to confuse as much as it is to incite us to think.

*Do The Right Thing* recreates the way in which all sorts of ethnic groups interact on one street in an American inner city. What we end up with is a war of economics fought out at a level of cultural identity. These economic relationships which clash constantly in our society are masked by Lee through their ethno-cultural explanations. Unlike what happened in Los Angeles in April of 1992, *Do The Right Thing* only depicts a race riot motivated by black rage. The real life anger seen in Los Angeles, however, can not be so easily reduced to such simple explanations. L.A. was a multiracial, trans-class, largely male display of justified social rage. It signified a sense of powerlessness that

combined economic decline, cultural decay, and political apathy. Race was the catalyst not the cause. It was a multiracial riot that was as much about empty bellies and broken hearts as it was about police batons and Rodney King. The balance of grievances in the black community is complicated. The King beating was the symbol that linked police racism in Los Angeles to the crisis of black life everywhere, from Atlanta to Toronto. It was as much a protest against black America's exclusion from economic excess of the 1980's as it was an uprising against police racism and de facto segregation in schools and housing. The 1992 riot must be understood as an insurrection against an intolerable political-economic order.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Lee ignores this sort of nuanced understanding, and instead is happy to leave us with a picture of a reducible world characterised by race alone. We are shown how racism infects all of the tribes in this community. The movie, however, does not attempt to get to the bottom of where the anger and frustration is coming from.

In its look, its attitude, and its ideology *Do The Right Thing* is "brightly afrocetric". The hidden assumption of Spike Lee's work is that it is possible to have uncontested access to what the "real black community" is and what "positive images" are. Yet any notions of the "real black community" and "positive images" are value-laden, socially loaded, and ideologically charged. And as all nationalist propaganda is meant to do, Lee's culturally authentic nationalism only serves to reinforce the existing separations. Black feminist and cultural critic bell hooks points out that "one scary conservative idea voiced over and over again in this film is that everybody is safest in their 'own' neighbourhood, it is best if we remain with people like ourselves."<sup>4</sup> The smashing of the gates of the white power bastion can hardly be seen as a plea for multicultural tolerance. Anyone speaking up about these actions would be seen as breaking the solid front of black political protest. We see no brave or clear thinking souls. All we see is a mess of people who sink into confusion about the intensity of their feelings. It is precisely this confusion that leads Lee into the trap of intellectual breakdown. A breakdown that, as history has shown us, can only lead down the ugly slope of xenophobia.

Lee has discussed his difficulty in finding a suitable ending for *Do The Right Thing*. This does not seem to be the case with 1991's *Jungle Fever*. Here Lee clearly brings his separatist perspective to bear on interracial sex. He also attempts to tackle two other problems that threaten black identity and the black community. The first is the destruction and devastation of crack. The second is the growing loss of solidarity between middle-class upwardly mobile blacks and those they have forgotten in the poor inner city.





Flipper with his wife (Lonette McKee).

The movie opens with a still photo of Yusuf Hawkins, a young black man who was beaten to death, in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, because he was thought to be dating a white woman. His murder was a modern day lynching rooted in the historically tormenting fears of race and sexuality. At the core of the psychology of racism is the forbidden fruit of interracial sexuality. North Americans are obsessed with sex and fearful of black sexuality. Lee apparently sets out to explore this zone.

Today, black America is, as it has always been, substantially poor, working class, and largely segregated, although its white-collar middle class has grown significantly. The poorer blacks are likely to live in all-black ghettos, while many middle class blacks work, study, and even live side by side with whites. The Purify family in *Jungle Fever* are of the latter group.

We are quickly introduced to the middle-class lifestyle of the central figure Flipper Purify. The New York Times falls on the doorstep of his upscale brownstone in the lively diverse Harlem. Inside, the happy couple are experiencing sexual pleasure to the delight of their young daughter who listens in the next room. After a satisfying morning of hot sex and warm breakfast, Flipper takes us to the architectural firm where he works. Here he is a black man trying hard to survive in a "cruel and harsh white corporate America." Immediately we learn that he is in line for a new secretary. He has specifically asked for an African-American. Instead, he is given Angie Tucci, a white Italian from Bensonhurst. In direct provocation, by the

white owners, he is predictably charged as being a reverse racist. Later in the film he is denied the partnership he obviously deserves. It is clear that his paper-thin stereotyped bosses will not give Flipper any justice. As a result he resigns on the spot and leaves to start his own business.

But before his resignation Flipper is presented with a question. What is he supposed to do when stuck with a beautiful white Italian-American as his secretary? The answer is to have an affair with her.

To give us an understanding of the kind of person Flipper is messing with Lee takes us to Angie's home in the dull sameness of ethnic Bensonhurst. Here we meet the vulgarly racist Tucci family. Angie is obviously trapped in servitude by her motherless brothers and father. She is offered slight refuge from the ignorance of her family by her long-time, sensitive but inexperienced, boyfriend Paulie Carbone. But Paulie is not enough. Angie sees all her lost potential being fulfilled in Flipper. His cultural refinement is all part of the banal fantasy of the superior male being lifting the woman out her situation.

2. Stanley Crouch, "Do The Rage Thing" in *Notes of a Hanging Judge*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1990) p.240.

3. Cornel West, *Race Matters*, (Vintage Books, New York, 1994) p.3-6. See also Mike Davis, "Who Killed LA? A Political Autopsy" in *The New Left Review* 197, January/February 1993.

4. bell hooks, "Counter-Hegemonic Art" in *Yearning*, (Between the Lines, Toronto, 1990) p.175.



Paulie's situation is not far-off from Angie's. He too comes from a motherless family where he is trapped like a slave by his uncaring father. Paulie runs his father's candy shop that is the centre of the Italian male community. Here we are treated to pathetic discussions on the "otherness" of racial sexuality. The Italians are presented disgracefully as morally and intellectually inferior to the black characters. We see no New York Times in this neighbourhood. Intelligence, it seems, is a rare commodity in Italian Bensonhurst. These characters are filled with suspicion, paranoia, and hatred. With the exception of Paulie, the folks in the candy shop are pure racists. Paulie grabs our sympathy. He reads, ponders race-relations and is quietly attracted to a smart and sophisticated black woman who offers him charitable promise.

The affair between Angie and Flipper moves quickly, but it does not go unnoticed. As soon as their friends betray their secret their worlds fall apart. Angie is beaten viciously by her father and thrown out on the street. He tells her he would "rather put a knife through [his] heart than be the father of a nigger lover." Flipper fairs little better as he is also thrown out of the house by his wife Drew. There can be no sympathy for these two traitors.

As outcasts, Flipper and Angie, for some unknown reason, set up a life together in the neutral zone of Greenwich Village. It is obvious that this relationship will be made impossible. Everywhere this couple goes

they are met with contempt. Flipper takes Angie to a black restaurant where they are given pointed insults mixed with references to racial solidarity. At dinner at Flipper's parents' house, his father the Reverend Purify delivers a particularly ugly sermon about the history of inter-racial sex and desire. The Reverend informs his son that he will not eat with "whore-mongers" who are no better than white slave-owners. Later, after a play-fight in front of their apartment the armed white police arrive to arrest the apparent black attacker. After having a gun brutally pushed against his face, Flipper drops to his knees and in a moment of existential angst asks "What the fuck am I doing here?" He is clearly a man fallen from grace surrounded by violent pressure. One can only assume he has done the wrong thing.

Race and colour affect everybody in this movie. They penetrate into every crevice of social life. Lee describes the film as one "about two people who are attracted to each other because of sexual mythology. She is attracted to him because she's been told that black men know how to fuck. He's attracted to her because all his life he's been bombarded with images of white women being the epitome of beauty and the standard that everything else must be measured against."<sup>5</sup> Flipper's wife is of mixed blood. When she finds out about her husband's infidelity with a white woman she is enraged with a passion and emotion she has carried her entire life. She chastises Flipper with reference to her childhood. "I've told you what happened to me

when I was growing up...I told you how they called me high yellow, yellow bitch, white honkey, honkey white, white nigger, nigger white, octaroon, quadroon, half breed mongrel...". As he did in his earlier film *School Daze*, Lee brings up the issue of skin colour and intra-racial conflict. Drew's anxiety comes from the compromised black identity she has been given. Despite her struggle to be black it was her light skin that attracted Flipper to her. Now Flipper has betrayed her by going to a white woman. She informs her husband that white people hate black people because they desperately want to be black.

This discussion is carried further in the dramatic "war council" meeting of the black sisters. Its attempt is to answer what white women see in black



Conflict in *Jungle Fever*.



men. The conversation begins with concerns on how to keep a good black man when the supply is depleted by addiction, prison, murder, homosexuality (gay sensitivities are no concern to Spike Lee), and white women.

We are again reminded that if you look like an African black, no black man will find you beautiful. Black men cannot wait to get into white women. Having a white woman means getting ahead in the world. White women, of course, also lust after black men. Why is this? One woman answers with a joke that she is going back to Africa to find "a Zulu with a dick down to his knee and get some serious fucking." This, we are led to believe, is obviously the attraction frustrated women (white women especially) have toward black men. Now we understand the female half of jungle fever.

North Americans are obsessed with sex and afraid of black sexuality. The obsession, in no small part, has to do with a need for constant stimulation and meaning in capitalist culture. The fear has to do with feelings about black people fuelled by sexual myths.

**The myths offer distorted, dehumanized creatures whose bodies - colour of skin, shape of nose and lips, type of hair, size of hips - are already distinguished from the white norm of beauty and whose fearful sexual activities are deemed disgusting, dirty, or funky and considered less acceptable.<sup>6</sup>**

It is virtually impossible to talk about race without talking about sex. Clear dialogue and critical thinking about this subject is essential. White fear of black sexuality is a basic component of white racism. Many white folks view black sexuality (and their own sexuality) with disgust. Yet even though these myths persist, more and more white people and black people are willing to interact sexually on an equal and democratic basis. Unfortunately, rather than demythologize or explore this important issue, Lee at best runs away from it, and at worst perpetuates the myths.

The relationship between Flipper and Angie is short and contains no meaning or passion. The problem is the lack of needed dimension in Flipper's character. As a member of the black middle class in the midst of an identity crisis, the film only hints at Flipper's conflict. It does not explore the issue Lee so desperately wants to focus on - Flipper's intra-racial racism. Nor does it ever come close to detailing Flipper's interest in Angie. All we know is that he "was curious about white." This is hardly the sort of thing Eldridge Cleaver and Malcolm X were referring to in their discussions of the rape or exploitation of white women. The complex and psychologically explosive meanings of this relationship are ignored. Lee raises the issue but in typical fashion leaves it hanging behind. Views are expressed, but

Lee won't take the necessary responsibility required in exploring them.

Both Angie and Paulie are attracted to blacks. Their attractions are toward the educated and sophisticated potential that will lift them from the confining prison of Italian Bensonhurst. It is obviously not a relationship on equal terms. The white folk are offered promise and possibility by loving black folk. The black folk in return can only be destroyed. Lee does not see the Italian and black communities as equally responsible or morally equivalent. So much for smashing myths.

The relationship between Flipper and Angie finally ends as they return to their separate and unequal communities. Angie with her tail between her legs returns to her abusive father. Flipper on the other hand has a bit more work to do before he can be fully redeemed.

Flipper's brother is a crack head who is banned from the family home. He, like a thousand other tragic cases, is reduced to pimping and stealing to feed his addiction. Lee takes us into a horrible underworld of drugs and desperation. Flipper's fall from grace is symbolically matched with his beautifully filmed descent into a crack house to find his brother. It is ultimately a futile quest. Flipper's brother is also a lost soul. In the end he is killed by his father and given no chance of redemption. Unlike his brother, Flipper is able to return home to his wife, daughter.

In the final scene Flipper encounters a black prostitute soliciting him on the street. In a cry of anguish he hugs her in solidarity. This is a rallying cry. Flipper is redeemed. He has returned to his family, his community, and his race. As his name indicates Flipper is now purified. We are all supposed to agree that Flipper has done the right thing. Lee's cynical message reminds us that all is good when we stay in our own neighbourhoods. Once again, Lee reinforces the idea that white and black communities are irreconcilably hostile.

Lee no doubt believes that his provocative images induce awareness of race relations and force people to confront their values vis-à-vis racism. Although he begins with the ostensible task of exposing the secret thoughts and deeds of bigotry, he actually turns it into a means of concealment. His easy answer attitude only inhibits frank discussions of what really happens between blacks and whites today. The very conflicts that keep racism going are ignored. The challenge today, however, is to turn the easy answers into critical questions - questions that so desperately need to be asked to those with power. Without doing this there is no way to demand that we resolve our differences. The conflicts still remain, only now they are presented in an

5. Spike Lee, as quoted in V. Smith's "Spiking a Fever" in *Newsweek*, June 10, 1991.

6. West, p.120



updated and ambitiously constructed disguises.

When examining Spike Lee's films, I think it is essential to do so within the context of both local and global cultural diversity. Henry Louis Gates jr. points out that

**the problem of the twenty first century will be the problem of ethnic differences, as they conspire with complex differences in colour, gender, and class. As actual differences between social and ethnic groups are being brought to bear to justify the subordination of one group by another, the matter of multiculturalism becomes politically fraught. Until these differences are understood in an era of emergent nationalism, the challenge of mutual understanding among the world's multifarious cultures will be the single greatest challenge we face.<sup>7</sup>**

The use of the words culture and identity are part of a new trend in contemporary political discourse. Identity refers to the various labels which individuals attach to themselves or which are attached to them by others, and which identify them as members of a specific group. In a broad sense, identity politics is simply any political action which is legitimized by some appeal to identity. It is easy to list increasing incidents of violence associated with ethnic difference throughout the world: orthodox Jews and African-Americans in Crown Heights, Brooklyn; Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in the former Yugoslavia; Zulus and Xhosans in South Africa; the Irish and the British in the United Kingdom; the Jews and Palestinians in Israel; the Tutsis and Hutu in Rwanda; the list goes on and on. In all of these cases the issue of cultural and social affinity has been used to conceal a host of odious sins.

On a narrower scale, identity politics presents itself as a strategy based on the militant assertion by groups of their specific identities based on specific oppressions. In America we see conservative presidential candidates urging a "cultural war", while so-called progressives orate about separatism. It is against this ghastly background that Spike Lee offers us his two cents. Surely he cannot know what demons he is invoking.

There is, of course, no simple way to deal with the complexity of cultural crossing in North America. Mixing and interaction are the rule, not the exception. As such there is no choice but to live in recognition of difference. But this is destroyed when those differences get turned into cultural barricades. To the extent that oppressed groups take their stand on the particularity of their oppression, the effect is likely to be a process of further fragmentation. A good example is provided by the recent phenomenon of oppression competition. Increasingly, we are seeing a process of differentiation

as various groups claim the special and acute character of their oppression in opposition to other groups. This was made quite clear at the gay and lesbian civil rights march on Washington. Many (straight) black leaders were quite outspoken that the call for gay civil rights was inappropriate. For these skeptics, to be gay is seen as an inconvenience; to be black, on the other hand, is to inherit a legacy of hardship and inequality. The question became one of asking who was more oppressed. The problem with this is that it presupposes a measuring tool that does not and cannot exist.

Lee's Afrocentrism, a contemporary form of black nationalism,

**is a gallant yet misguided attempt to define an African identity in a white society perceived to be hostile. It is gallant because it puts black doing and suffering, not white anxieties and fears, at the centre of discussion. It is misguided because - out of fear of cultural hybridization and through silence on the issue of class, retrograde views on black women, gay men, and lesbians, and a reluctance to link race to the common good - it reinforces narrow discussions about race.<sup>8</sup>**

It simply perpetuates the injustice it so much wants to fight against.

Race is perhaps the most explosive issue in contemporary American life. It is at the core of the crisis of so-called capitalist democracy. It should force us to confront the tragic facts of poverty, paranoia, despair and distrust. *Do The Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever* avoid this confrontation. These works fluctuate between self-indulgent expressiveness and a mainly impotent politicization. They move from argument to conviction by spectacle. This sort of picture results in a failure to confront, among other things, the overarching totality of capitalism as a social system. This is a system which is constituted by class exploitation but which shapes all of our identities and social relations. It is more than just a system of class oppression. Among other things, it subjects all social life to the abstract requirements of the market, through the commodification of life in all its aspects. It makes a mockery of all our aspirations to true autonomy, freedom of choice, and participation in a democratic community. And in our increasingly mean-spirited conservative culture, it would do us well to remember that emphasising the "vertical" or cultural divisions - between ethnicities, races, colours, sexes - plays right into the hands of the overclass, which wishes that nobody would look too carefully at the "horizontal" or class divisions.

North America presents a complex dialectic of identity and antagonisms. It is an irrational relationship that is



the product of a complicated history. Since the inconvenience of history is that it does not go away the task, therefore, is to establish a new framework of understanding. This involves a recognition of our basic humanness. It means shaping a truly common public culture. The fundamental aim

**is to replace racial reasoning with a moral reasoning, to understand the black freedom struggle not as an affair of skin pigmentation and racial phenotype but rather as a matter of ethical principles and wise politics, and to combat the black nationalist attempt to subordinate the issues...It links black self-love and self-respect to egalitarian relations within and outside black communities.<sup>9</sup>**

Perhaps what is needed is a vision of pluralism that does indeed acknowledge diversity and pluralism, not merely difference or multiplicity. The failure of Spike Lee is that he reinforces rather than dismantles the framework that now exists. It is, after all, a framework that wants to keep people apart.

In responding to the challenges facing black communities today, Spike Lee functions in a self-referential manner. He is altruistic to the community closest to him, and those more distant are treated like pictures rather than human beings. He knows that the black community has been forced into a position with its back against the wall. The conditions are such that all sense of possibility appears undermined. In such situations people look for intellectual and existential affirmation to sustain their self-confidence and their humanity. Lee uses this space in order to put forward his romantic political visions of idealized community. This mentality, however, has to be called for what it is. It should be understood, but it also has to be criticised. The question that begs asking is if you're really interested in ending racism, will these black nationalist views deliver this?

With the case of Spike Lee the answer is in the negative. Though his films try to transgress boundaries they often work to reinforce the status quo. *Do The Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever* package the debate in categories that suggest a conclusion that reinforces racial polarization. This is the worst thing that can happen.

A truly pluralist model of integration can only thrive if there are communities, organizations, subcultures, and networks of people who can come together without inhibiting individual expressions and idiosyncrasies. It should establish the relationship between the different forms of oppression in order to identify the common interests which different oppressed groups may turn out to have. This involves the cultivation of

critical sensibilities that recognize the structural connections between capitalist exploitation, and racial, sexual, and national oppressions. Given the escalating racial hostility, violence, and polarization in our world it must, above all, avoid a narrow, and politically useless closing-of-the-ranks mentality.

Spike Lee has left us with a collection of films that have brought the issues of racism to the centre of Hollywood cinema. These are intense issues that are not going away. His films are part of a discussion that is destined to go on for as long as America goes on. Clearly, the intersections of class, race, gender, and sexuality intensifies the need for transformative solutions that make the combination of economic equality and the awareness of identity all the more important. To his credit, Lee creates films that elicit discussion and debate around these issues. And, in spite of himself, it is this discussion that will in the end bring us together, rather than tear us apart.

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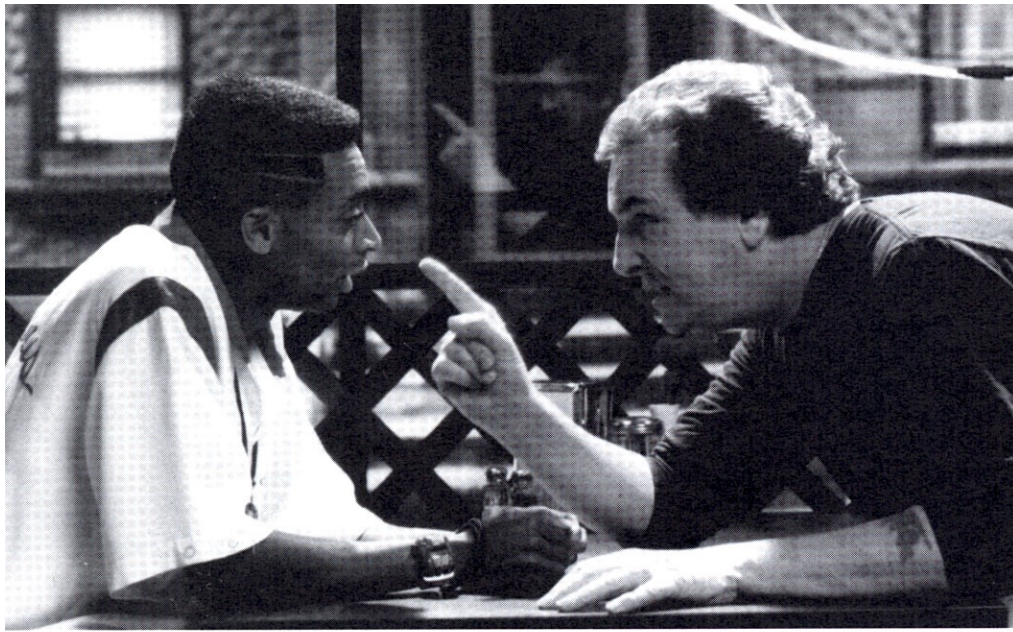
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Mookie and Sal in *Do the Right Thing*.



*Jungle Fever*: John Turturro (left) as Paulie.

## MORE THAN THE VIOLENCE: a reading of intergenerational relationships in **Do the Right Thing** and **Jungle Fever**

by Cory Silverberg

**S**pike Lee is known for giving difficult interviews. His interviewers variously describe him as short tempered, easily distracted, uninterested, and too confrontational. Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of Lee for an interviewer is his habit of turning a question around. If asked why he chose to do something in a film his response is invariably, "Why are you asking me this?" His interview style is designed to put the interviewer, and often the reader, on the defensive. He is bold and he likes to shock. Unfortunately, shock value does little to contribute to meaningful or honest dialogue between people. For example, while many people felt Madonna's book *Sex* was shocking in the end it did little to contribute to an open or honest social discourse on sexuality in Western society. It was shocking (to some, mostly heterosexual, people), it sold well, and she moved on. One might say that in some of Lee's films (particularly *Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever*) he achieves with race what Madonna achieved with sex. Both are interested in throwing popular images back to the public, both are interested, if only on a surface level, in challenging some stereotypes, and both are com-

mitted to making money, and producing images that endorse capitalistic notions of success and power. While Madonna usually leaves me empty because, to me, it feels like she has copped out, Lee creates greater problems. It is the violence in Lee's films that I find most problematic. His practically sole reliance on violence and hatred to convey meaning usually leaves me feeling emotionally empty and intellectually ripped off. Yet there is something in Lee's films that keeps me coming back (albeit with increasing hesitancy). Both his overall aesthetic and "guerrilla filmmaking" style are undeniably interesting to watch. More than this, however, is my fascination with Lee's treatment of intergenerational relationships in his movies. Lee's interest in intergenerational relationships is an aspect of his films that seems to go unnoticed, unappreciated, and misunderstood most of the time. It is however one of his great strengths as a writer and director. Few American filmmakers are able to deal with three generations in one movie without resorting to a sickly sweet Disney type sentimentality. Lee's success at doing this may be tied to the historical/cultural values of many African Americans for whom older generations are not immediately considered worthless by younger ones. In some, less Westernized, communities there is a much higher





Flipper and his friend (Spike Lee) discuss his controversial relationship.

visibility of the elderly. Older generations are not only valued for their wisdom (an enduring Western stereotype about "primitive" cultures) but also for their competence. In these communities they can be found acting as surrogate parents to their grandchildren and other neighbourhood children, taking an active role in raising the next generation. Thus in a community in the West Indies, or the southern US, the very old and very young are equally visible and they are engaged in dealing with one another on a daily basis.

While my own heritage speaks to this same form of relationship between the very old and the very young, many of our traditions have been lost with the increasing secularization and "Americanization" of Jews that took place following immigration during the Second World War. Most of our original ways of dealing with age and most of our basic understandings of experience, competence, and wisdom, have given way to nursing homes, retirement communities, and any number of other more subtle ways we have chosen to ignore our elders (and the mortality they remind us of). It is always important to go beyond the surface when issues of intergenerational relations are dealt with in mainstream Western cultural productions. Two of Lee's films that can contribute to a meaningful discourse on intergenerational relationships are the above mentioned *Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever*. We can investigate this potential by first looking at the representation of the different generations in the films and then seeing how Lee has the generations interact with one another.

*Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever* are connected in a number of ways. Both films are dedicated to black youths who were killed by police or under other questionable circumstances. Indeed, the police in the two films are entirely interchangeable. They are played by the same actors (Miguel Sandoval and Rick Aiello) and speak the same

lines in both films; "what a waste", first referring to the three men on the curb in *Do the Right Thing* and then to the fact that Flipper and Angie are lovers in *Jungle Fever*. Both films also deal explicitly with violence and sexuality in a kind of magic reality, where everything happens much faster and with much greater intensity. While this analogy is not precise (as it would be with a film like Paul Shapiro's *The Lotus Eaters*) there is something in Lee's intentionality, in the way that he uses colour and the way he constructs shots, that always reminds me of the work of contemporary magic realist painters. The two films also develop similar themes, and, read chronologically, *Jungle Fever* is an extension of *Do the Right Thing*. The first film directly informs one's reading of the second. Throughout *Jungle Fever* one wonders when Flipper will *Do the Right Thing*, and what that will be. It could also be said that both films suffer the same flaws. They both deal with race, and the topic of race envy, in a similarly narrowly defined way (i.e. in both films race is constructed as functionally and literally separate from issues of class, gender, sexuality, etc.). Both films also suffer greatly from Lee's perpetually juvenile treatment of sex and sexuality. The sex scenes in both films are traditional, heterocentric film fodder for the dulled imagination. While Lee may be trying to push the racial envelope in his films, his Calvin-Klein-Obsession-commercial style of filming sex is sorely lacking any radical vision. Finally, both films can be read as constructed dichotomies designed to inform the future of political activism. The influences of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X are heavily felt in both films. Lee appears to play with different generations by aligning them with one or the other man's philosophies. Ultimately, of course, this dichotomy between peaceful and violent resistance is false as it ignores much of the complexity in both men's experience. It is also problematic because it does









not allow for a middle ground to be sought. Much of the conflict between the generations in these films can be read as conflict between modes of activism, and ways of being.

*Do the Right Thing* has three distinct generations living together in the Bed-Stuy neighbourhood. Da Mayor and Mother Sister belong to the first generation. It was their parents who were most likely brought to America to work as slaves. In his essay "Fuck Sal's Pizza" James Hurst suggests that Da Mayor is "symbolic of the turn-the-other-cheek school of bowing and scraping to the white man". This, however, is a simplification as it is a reading that does what Lee himself does far too often, it defines all characters and motivation by race alone. Da Mayor and Mother Sister can be read as more than just stereotypes, more than the friendly drunk and wise old matron. Even though Da Mayor is drunk and dishevelled throughout the film and even though Mother Sister eventually breaks down at the sight of the fire (reminiscent no doubt of other fires lit by other people) they are the only two characters who acknowledge that they are still standing at the end of the film. This acknowledgement is an expression of their own sense of agency. This older generation are not only grounded by their age and well worn place in the community, they also present a more calm and stable influence through their clear sense of what it means to *Do the Right Thing* (in fact it is Da Mayor who speaks these words, giving the film its title). This generation also distinguishes itself by its non-violent nature. As Da Mayor tells Mother Sister, "Da Mayor loves everybody". And with this love Da Mayor saves at least five lives in the movie (Eddie and himself from the car, and Sal, Pino, and Vito, from the angry community). Through his actions alone Da Mayor represents one of the most productive characters in the film. And through his love (which should not to be confused with passivity) he appears to best represent the words of Martin Luther King Jr. quoted at the end of the film. Both in their self-affirmation at the end of the film and their concern for the entire community, this generation represents what may seem to the younger generations an odd sort of love. It is love that turns the other cheek, yes, but it is also a love that never forgets. It is a well worn love, one that lacks the urgency of youth, and there seems something infinitely deeper, more grounded in the love of the first generation than in the younger generations who often treat them with disrespect and contempt.

The second generation in the film is best represented by the three neighbourhood men who sit on the side-walk; ML, Coconut Sid, and Sweet Dick Willy. They are the living result of the sixties and seventies. They were young men living in the hottest time of the

civil rights movement. They were the ones that marched with the Black Panthers and thought, however fleetingly, that things were going to get better. And finally they had to sit by and watch as their leaders were systematically assassinated or otherwise silenced. One gets the feeling that they have been sitting ever since. Through their lack of action in the film they function as a kind of historical artifact. Their history, and their deeply personal sense of the futility of action is communicated perfectly in one scene. A police car slowly drives by the men as the two cops and three men glare at each other. The soundtrack provides a lone piano playing an old spiritual. There is a knowingness in the looks that Coconut Sid and Sweet Dick Willy give the cops. An understanding between them that the cops are still the ones with the power. But there is also a power in their looks, something saying, you may have won, but not forever, and not for long. Whether productive or not, there is power in any form of resistance. Yet it is unlikely that these will be the men to do the work. While their slightly younger Korean neighbours are opening their own businesses Coconut Sid and the others are still debating whether or not it is because they're black that they cannot get anywhere. They have become immobilized by the debate.

The third generation, which drives the film, includes all of the young characters: Mookie, Vito, Ahmad, Radio Raheem etc.. This generation grew up witness to the bitterness of their parents as they struggled to adjust to life in the seventies and eighties. They have reacted to the older generation with equal bitterness, contempt, at times respect, and a lot of anger. One of the most striking things about this generation is their overt embracement of materialism. Mookie is far more concerned with the fact that Buggin' Out is "fucking up his shit" at Sal's than with the absence of black people on the Wall of Fame. Similarly, Buggin' Out is able to take time out from boycott organizing to clean his new shoes with a toothbrush. This is a generation that is going to get somewhere, and one aspect of that is to get somewhere financially. There are two characters that present a departure from this materialism and violence: Radio Raheem and Jade. Unlike the other characters Radio Raheem has already got somewhere in so far as his place in the community is established. Yet he is not defined by his economic power at all. And everything he achieves he does so non-violently. Instead he is defined by his music. It is his music that gave him his name. It is his music that allows him to beat the Puerto Ricans in the neighbourhood and defend himself and his community. And once that music is gone, when Sal destroys his tape recorder and says "I killed your fucking music" Radio Raheem is not



long to follow. Mookie's sister Jade is the most potentially radical character in the film and it is unfortunate that Lee seems unable, or unwilling, to allow Jade to reach her full potential. Jade distinguishes herself from her contemporaries in that she is interested in working with all aspects of her being, and in creating dialogue between all the members of her community. Jade's form of activism, in sharp contrast to Buggin' Out's, is inclusive. She makes her position clear when she tells him she is up for the fight but is only interested in fighting for something positive in the community. In so far as Lee constructs a dichotomy between the words of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X that close the film by aligning characters with one or the other, Jade represents "the best" of both men. It is too bad that in this film, as in *Jungle Fever*, Lee seems more interested in "boning" these women, than listening to them.

The first generation in *Jungle Fever* is represented by the same two actors as in *Do the Right Thing* (Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee). In this film too the older generation seems more closely linked to Martin Luther King Jr. (particularly his religious influence). However, it is interesting that the Good Reverend Doctor, who is the apparent antithesis of Da Mayor, garners less respect in his home than Da Mayor does. With the exception of Ahmad all of the characters in *Do the Right Thing* treat Da Mayor with at least some respect. The Good Reverend Doctor however is not respected by either of his sons and is feared more than respected by his wife. Just as in *Do the Right Thing* this generation is characterized by a tremendous strength and sense of history. But in the case of the Good Reverend Doctor, much of this history has become warped and entwined with his own, mysterious, history. What ties the two films together is again the sense of doing right by others. While the Good Reverend Doctor's sense of right and wrong may be highly questionable, like Da Mayor he has this sense intuitively. This is a perspective which the characters of the younger generations are clearly lacking.

The second generation in *Jungle Fever* are people who fall in age somewhere between Mookie and Sweet Dick Willy. These characters like Flipper, Drew, Angie, Cyrus, and Paulie are the ones that drive this film. This generation is still fighting the same battles as Mookie and Buggin' Out were, only now with a little more political and social savvy (and, not unimportantly, with more economic power). The phrase that best describes this generation is one both Flipper and Buggin' Out use with Spike Lee's characters. When asked how they are both tell Lee that they are just a black man struggling in a white man's world. What seems to separate this generation from the previous one in both films is the self-consciousness of their struggle. Where The Good Reverend Doctor sees his fight as a

battle between good and evil, and Sweet Dick Willy fought not as an individual but with the collective consciousness of a marginalized group, Flipper and Buggin' Out's generation fight alone as individuals, one black man against a completely white world.

A new and younger generation makes an appearance in *Jungle Fever*. This generation is represented by Ming, Flipper's daughter. While her role is small, she seems tied to the older girls who proposition Flipper in his neighbourhood. Through this generation Lee develops a new theme that refers back to the dedication of both films. This is the concern about future generations. This concern culminates in the final scene with Flipper desperately hugging a young girl and screaming "No!" This youngest generation is not really developed and has a large question mark looming over it. Lee is obviously worried about what the future holds for black children in America (since, as he reminds us, for many black children the future holds unjust murder).

While Lee's attempts to use King and X as dividing lines for characters may be somewhat constructed and static (allowing, as they do, for only two solutions or viewpoints to every issue), the interactions between generations provide us the opportunity for a more in-depth, fluid understanding of Lee's characters. One example of how this works is the influence of the behaviours and beliefs of the Good Reverend Doctor on his son Flipper in *Jungle Fever*. Throughout *Jungle Fever* Flipper is almost in constant motion. While he does sit and discuss issues of race and colour with Cyrus he does not let these issues bog him down or paralyze him as was the case with the neighbourhood men in *Do the Right Thing*. This behaviour can be seen as a direct reaction against his father. The tension between Flipper and his father is palpable. It seems the slower the Good Reverend Doctor speaks, moves, and acts the faster Flipper tries to move in his own life. In his father Flipper has seen how too much religious fervour and too much stubbornness can immobilize you. Flipper is tired of his father seeing the devil's handiwork in everything and he is tired of his father's stubbornness. His reaction is to act. However, in his constant reacting, he lacks the grounding of his father, he lacks a coherent sense of belief or even self. In a number of scenes one wonders whether his drive to action is too much, too fast, for his own good. It is unclear, for example, whether he was really in a position to ask for a partnership when he did. The audience is left wondering whether it was about colour, as Flipper suggests, or ego, as Tim Robbins' character suggests (or, most plausibly, a bit of both). His decision to act on his impulse and have sex with Angie may be another example. If Flipper had stopped to think about it would he have had sex with Angie in the first place? By looking at





*Jungle Fever*: the Italian-American family.

these questions from the framework of family and intergenerational relationships, the characters and the film itself can be read as far more than race. Questions of gender, age, love, commitment, all become involved in the way Flipper's actions are understood.

In *Do the Right Thing* the clash between generations is best expressed in one scene which is a confrontation between Ahmad and Da Mayor. Ahmad's outburst in this scene functions on a number of levels. On one level he is just a bratty kid asserting his power over the old. Ahmad shows no respect and ultimately no understanding of Da Mayor or his personal history. As Ahmad gets more and more angry (to the point where he has to be physically restrained by his friends) it is clear that more is going on here. On this other level Ahmad is reacting to Da Mayor as if Da Mayor alone is responsible for his own position and indeed for the fact that Ahmad is now discriminated against. That somehow if Ahmad were alive in the thirties he would have found a way to feed his wife and children and therefore in the eighties African Americans like Ahmad would not be discriminated against as much. Ahmad is not just blaming his parents, he is blaming the victim. He is ignorant of the past and the present. This supreme ignorance is exposed in the final scene at Sal's. Ahmad and his friends seem genuinely shocked to be called niggers by Sal. And they are perhaps the only people in the entire community

who are shocked by this. Their surprise exposes an essential ignorance to Sal and what he represents in the community. All of the anger Ahmad directed toward Da Mayor is now directed toward Sal as Ahmad and the others destroy his pizzeria. Meanwhile Da Mayor tries to help Sal by at least getting him out of the way. There is a juxtaposition here of the consistency in thought and action of the old and the impetuous unthinking actions of the young.

Little has been said so far regarding the way Lee deals with generations of other races in these two films. Intergenerational relationships in other races are less developed in Lee's work. Lee's focus is on African Americans and while individual characters from other races are well developed their interrelationships are at times lacking in depth. The older generations of other races are primarily characterized by loss and violence. Loss in that the older generations are always without their partners. It would be fascinating to speculate, for example, why there is not one Italian mother in either film. *Jungle Fever's* Paulie and Angie both live with their fathers. Sal's wife is also dead. There are a number of possible explanations for this absence. Most obvious is the fact that Lee's ability to deal with female characters on screen comes close to rivaling Oliver Stone. Lee has shown himself unable to portray on the screen women who are strong, sensitive, and complex. While a few of





Spike Lee as Mookie in *Do The Right Thing*.

his female characters have possibilities of complexity (I would argue that both Jade in *Do the Right Thing* and Angie in *Jungle Fever* are women who possess far more intelligence and insight than either Lee or any of his male characters can understand) most of the women in his films serve as sexual objects to be manipulated and used by the men. A second possibility is the troubles that women of this generation might create in the construction of characters in the film. To include female characters with history and depth of all races in either film may provide too strong a common ground, which may in turn convolute Lee's meaning. The older generation in these films are characterized by forethought, some wisdom, and more than anything else, an emotional resonance. If Lee is interested in dichotomizing race then the simultaneous existence of Italian American and African American mothers may be more than his dialectic can handle. Lee stays safe by only giving us younger women from other races to deal with. More than loss however, these families are characterized by violence. Be it Sal's assertion that if any smacking is going on it is going to be done by him; the horrific whipping scene between Angie and her father; Paulie's father screaming at him and hitting him in the bathroom calling him a girl; or the equally violent high-pitched screams of Tina and her mother. The amount of physical and emotional violence in these scenes is staggering. Little else is developed in the relationships between the generations of other races in the two films.

If nothing else these relationships act as a reminder and warning of the truth of Martin Luther King's words at the end of *Do the Right Thing*. King asserts that violence leads to "bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers". And Lee is exceptionally gifted at showing us this bitterness and brutality in his characters.

No matter how hard you try, it is difficult to talk about these films without coming back to violence. This is hardly surprising as anger is the most accessible emotion in both these movies and incidents of violent behaviour beat out non-violent behaviour by about two to one. In this way Lee is quite realistically documenting a part of our present history. The challenge for the viewer is to move beyond, or below, this narrow representation. This is a difficult challenge to meet in a world that appears to be becoming increasingly violent as each day passes. However, trying to get behind the violence, trying to understand what drives us to hurt one another in such extreme ways, is ultimately the only hope we have of finding an alternative. There is potential in Lee's films for a more interesting look at how we are with one another. One example of this potential is Lee's use of intergenerational relationships. By examining both the issues close to his heart, like race, as well as other important aspects of our lives, like history, love, and communication, through the eyes of the family, by going beyond what is immediately given, we can engage in a slightly more radical, and certainly more diverse reading of the work.





# Contributors

**Elen Bovkis** is a recent graduate of York University in Film Studies, currently working as a free-lance writer and creative photographer.

**Mickey Burns** angry and frustrated with power-mongering, planet-killing, consumptive corporations, continues her meaningful work in advertising.

**Tony French**, now retired, was for many years a Professor of English in Australia and is the author of a book on Shakespeare's plays.

**Ted Kulczyk** is completing a Bachelor's degree in Film Studies at York University and writes a regular column for *Freewheelin'* magazine. He continues to ponder the relationships of cinema, music and values.

**Robert K. Lightning** is a freelance writer on film living in New York.

**Göran Persson** was a psychiatrist and psychotherapist at the Department of Psychiatry, Sahlgren's Hospital, Göteborg, Sweden.

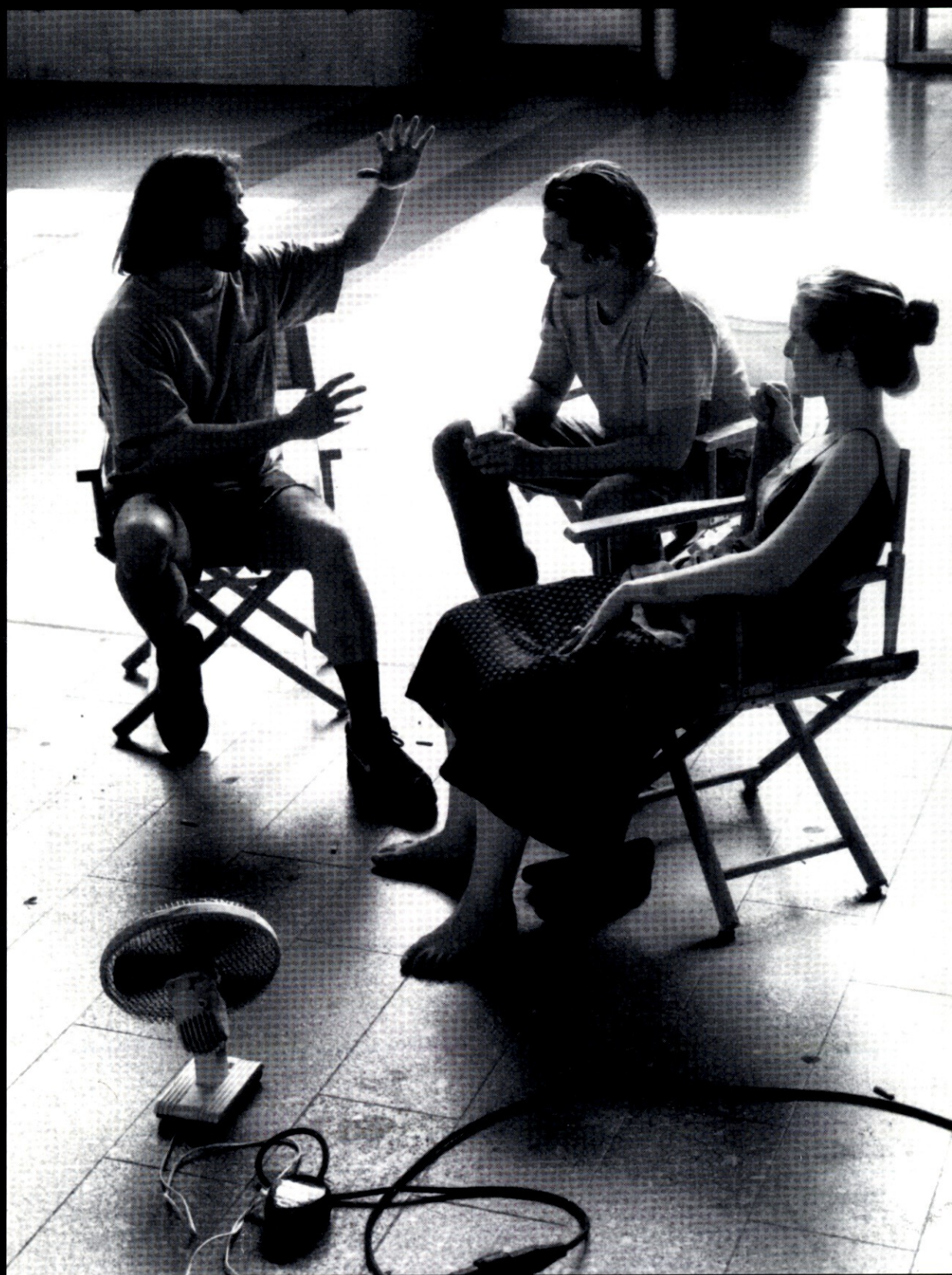
**Mitchell Shore** has just completed his final year as an undergraduate in Political Science at York University.

**Cory Silverberg** is with great regret leaving Toronto for Long Island to attend the Derner Institute for a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology.

**Deborah Thomas** has written for *Movie* and teaches Film Study at Sunderland Polytechnic in England.

Ken Norton and Susan George in *Mandingo*, probably the most undervalued and misrepresented of all Hollywood films: 'It is virtually impossible to talk about race without talking about sex' — Mitchell Shore on Spike Lee.





Richard Linklater directs Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy in *Before Sunrise*; one of the films to be discussed in the next issue.